ABSTRACT

A Phenomenological Case Study to Explore How First-year Undergraduate Muslim
Students Experience a Sense of Belonging on a College Campus in the Northeastern
United States

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This study added to the knowledge of student retention on a college campus by
focusing on how first-year Muslim students experience a sense of belonging. The profile
of college students has changed to reflect a more diverse population and U.S. colleges
and universities need to be prepared to meet the needs of students with varying identities.
The majority of undergraduate students coming to college have grown up in a post 9/11
world—a world in which Muslims in America face scrutiny, exclusion, and
discrimination (Elbih, 2013). The ability of an institution to meet the needs of students
and create environments of inclusion affects the retention of their students.

This qualitative phenomenological case study relied on interviews, photo-
elicitation, and reflection statements of five participants to give voice to the lived
experiences of several first-year, Muslim students at an urban university in Philadelphia,
Pennsylvania. The primary research question was: How do first-year Muslim
undergraduate students at an urban university in the northeastern United States describe
their sense of belonging on campus? Data were analyzed using an a priori theoretical

framework influenced by Maslow (1943), Goodenow (1993), and Strayhorn (2012). A within-case analysis was conducted, providing a detailed description of each case, followed by an across-case analysis, which allowed for the identification of themes across all cases (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

This study yielded three main themes connected to the belonging experiences of first-year Muslim students on a college campus. Feelings of being valued, connections with peers, and diverse interactions contributed to the belonging experiences of the participants both in and out of the classroom. Because of this study, university administrators and faculty must identify opportunities to increase faculty-student interactions, increase understanding of religious diversity, allocate resources to support Muslim identity-based student organizations and student spaces, and better understand the new student orientation programs in place on their campus.

A Phenomenological Case Study to Explore How First-year Undergraduate Muslim Students Experience a Sense of Belonging on a College Campus in the Northeastern United States

by

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A Dissertation

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

DEI: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

ICC: Intercultural Center

MSA: Muslim Student Association

PSSM: Psychological Sense of School Membership

SOBI: Sense of Belonging Instrument

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

DEDICATION

To my family and my family of friends

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction to the Problem of Practice

*Introduction*

The Higher Education Demand Index, known as HEDI, predicts that enrollment at colleges and universities will decline ten percent in the coming decade (Grawe, 2018). Data also suggest that the downturn in college attendance will likely not impact the nation's most elite institutions but will steepen the competition among the less selective to attract, enroll, and retain students (Grawe, 2018). The profile of college students is changing to reflect a more diverse population and U.S. colleges and universities need to think about student populations differently to meet the needs of students with varying identities (Hoover, 2020). The ability of an institution to meet the needs of students will have a direct impact on the retention of their students.

When discussing the diversity of a college campus, most often the conversation and research focus on the racial, ethnic, gender, and socioeconomic identities of students. This approach is with good reason; however, when it comes to considering the experiences of minority students on today's college campus religious identity is often overlooked (Bowman & Smedley, 2013). For many colleges and universities, particularly secular institutions, resources allocated towards religious programs are not prioritized (Schaidle, 2016). Colleges and universities should be considerate of the spiritual and religious identity of students, as this is influential in how they move throughout their day, engage with communities, and define their relationship to the world (Nasir & Al-Amin, 2006).

Islam has grown to be the largest non-Christian identity in the United States and the second-largest religious identity in the world (Pew Research Center, 2015). Despite an increase in population and thus higher visibility of Muslim Americans, Islamophobia continues to grow in the United States, with nearly half of Americans holding negative perceptions toward Muslims (Schaidle, 2016). As the population of Muslims in the United States continues to increase, it behooves institutions of higher education to consider religious identity when thinking through how best to support students for retention.

There is a gap in scholarship concerning how first-year Muslim college students experience belonging on a college campus. Existing research has explored belonging and its importance for student success (Goodenow, 1993; Strayhorn, 2012; Tinto, 1993). There has been some work done to understand the implications of belonging for various underrepresented identity groups (Museus & Maramba, 2011; Strayhorn, 2012; Tachine et al., 2017) on college campuses; however, there is limited research on how belonging is experienced by religious identity. This study built upon existing scholarship focused on how Muslim students experience college and gave voice to a group of students that identify with a religion that is misunderstood and negatively perceived by many Americans (Schaidle, 2016).

*Statement of the Problem*

The demographics of higher education are shifting, and colleges and universities must consider the needs of a diverse student body to remain competitive in attracting and retaining students (Grawe, 2018; Hoover, 2020). Multiple studies highlight how a sense of belonging contributes to retention and other positive student outcomes in higher

education (Strayhorn, 2012; Tinto, 1993). "Sense of belonging" refers to a person's fit or involvement in a system or environment and their perceived value within that system or environment (Goodenow, 1993; Hagerty & Patusky, 1995; Maslow, 1954; Strayhorn, 2012). Within higher education, a sense of belonging has historically focused on a student's connection to their faculty or peers and integration into the college environment (Tinto, 1993; Strayhorn, 2012).

Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure focuses on retention and student success in higher education. Tinto (1993) describes three stages: separation, transition, and departure in his theory. In the first stage, separation, students that can separate themselves from their previous communities and integrate themselves into the college community are likely to be successful (Tinto, 1993). In the next stage, students enter a stressful period in which they must exhibit coping mechanisms to progress (Tinto, 1993). Tinto (1993) argues that student success during this difficult period depends greatly on the pre-work or preparatory steps taken before their official arrival on campus. Students that limit their time on campus and subsequently their interactions with campus community members are less likely to stay enrolled (Tinto, 1993). The final stage of Tinto's (1993) theory focuses on incorporation. This final stage concentrates on the social and academic connections of students with campus community members in both formal and informal settings (Tinto, 1993). Successful movement through this stage relies heavily on the degree to which a student's values and beliefs align with those of the institution (Tinto, 1993). Though Tinto's (1993) theory does not specifically identify a sense of belonging, it does highlight the importance of involvement and connection to members of the campus community as essential to student success.

Critics of Tinto's (1993) work argue that the theorist fails to recognize and value a student's cultural background and that his theory is rooted in the values and norms of predominantly White institutions (Guiffrida, 2006; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Seggie & Sanford, 2010). Guiffrida (2006) challenges Tinto's (1993) work by arguing that encouraging a student to leave behind their cultural and family background will adversely impact their continued success at the institution. "Tinto's (1993) theory places tremendous emphasis on the importance of students assimilating to the college environment rather than focusing on the unique backgrounds and support systems of minority students" (Palmer et al., 2011, p. 581). Rather than charging the student with the responsibility of seeking a sense of belonging, institutions have a shared responsibility to create culturally supportive opportunities for student engagement (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Thus, interventions used to foster the retention of college students must consider how identity shapes a sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012).

Existing research explores how underrepresented students on college campuses experience belonging (Museus & Maramba, 2011; Tachine et al., 2017). While important and impactful, the majority of those studies have not focused on the experience of belonging as it relates to the religious identity of students. Christianity continues to be the dominant religious identity in American higher education; however, enrollment of religious minority students is increasing. This shift in demographics makes it more and more important for colleges and universities to understand the unique needs of these populations (Pew Research Center, 2011; Seggie & Sanford, 2010). How Muslim students experience a sense of belonging on American college campuses is especially deserving of attention because of the increased numbers of Muslims enrolling in college.

A survey out of the Pew Research Center (2011) indicated that Muslim Americans report higher levels of enrollment in college or university classes (26%) compared to 13% of the general population.

Further complicating the situation for Muslim students is that Islam as a practice and as an identity has seen increased attention in the years post 9/11 (Nasir &Al-Amin, 2006). Anti-Muslim rhetoric during the 2016 presidential campaign and subsequent executive orders under the administration of President Donald Trump have fueled Islamophobia in the United States (Jamal, 2017; Whitehead et al., 2018). Whitehead et al. (2018) share that Trump fans were more likely to be concerned about "terrorism" and afraid of refugees from Muslim countries. An increase in bias and hate crimes towards Muslims, and Muslim women specifically, has taken place since 2016 as the Trump administration consistently ties conversations about Islam and Muslims with the need for increased security measures in the United States (Jamal, 2017). The Southern Poverty Law Center looked at FBI anti-Muslim hate crimes data from when Trump announced his candidacy in 2014 through his election in 2016 and determined that the overall number of anti-Muslim hate incidents and Muslim victims have increased 99% or more in that timeframe (Beutel, 2017). These data points emphasize how the Trump administration has propagated hatred towards Muslim people in the United States. It would be naive to think that America's colleges and universities are immune to negative perceptions and stereotyping of Muslims. The Department of Education reports an increase in hate crimes on American college campuses since 2016 with 19% of reported hate crimes connected to victims' religious affiliation (Bauman, 2018).

If colleges and universities are serious about supporting and retaining students of diverse identities, including religious identity, then understanding how Muslim students experience belonging is more critical today than ever. With greater understanding, institutions of higher education can better support this population during a critical time in their personal development while also meeting enrollment and retention goals. In addition to filling a current gap in research, this study opened the door for continued exploration of how religious identity impacts belonging.

*Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological case study was to explore how first-year Muslim students experience a sense of belonging on a college campus in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Sense of belonging is a basic human need referring to a person's fit or involvement in a system or environment and their perceived value within that system or environment, which directly affects motivation for higher-order outcomes (Goodenow, 1993; Maslow, 1954; Strayhorn, 2012). This study assisted in understanding the individual lived experiences of first-year Muslim students as they transition from high school into higher education. Further, this study highlighted the challenges and successes of first-year Muslim students so that university administrators can recognize the unique needs of this specific student population as it relates to their perceived value and integration into the college campus environment.

The central or primary research question in this study asked: How do first-year Muslim undergraduate students at an urban university in the northeastern United States describe their sense of belonging on campus? The secondary research questions of the

study focused more intently on identifying the key contributors, as well as any barriers, to

the students' sense of belonging. Specifically, the secondary research questions asked:

1. What are the key components/experiences contributing to first-year Muslim students' sense of belonging?

2. What conditions/experiences contribute to first-year Muslim students feeling unconnected or unwelcome as if they do not belong?

3. How do first-year Muslim students describe their feelings of belonging in the classroom?

4. How do first-year Muslim students describe their sense of belonging outside of the classroom?

*Philosophical Assumptions: Theoretical Frameworks*

This study was rooted in *a priori* theoretical framework that pulls on the work of

Maslow (1954), Goodenow (1993), and Strayhorn (2012), to understand the value and

definition of belonging. First, the theory of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1954) frames

belonging as a critical and fundamental human need. Maslow's (1954) theory argues that

without securing a sense of belonging, a person cannot be motivated to pursue higher-

order needs such as self-esteem and self-actualization. Like Maslow (1954), Goodenow

(1993) recognized the value of belonging and sought to develop the Psychological Sense

of School Membership (PSSM) Scale in order to understand the variables associated with

the construct of belonging. Other belonging instruments, like that of Hagerty and

Patusky's (1995) Sense of Belonging Instrument (SOBI), have also provided a

quantitative approach to understanding belonging; however, Goodenow's (1993)

instrument specifically looks at belonging within an educational context. Goodenow's

(1993) instrument not only identifies social and contextual influences on belonging but

also assists with measuring individual differences to identify students that are struggling.

Goodenow (1993) suggests that there may be a variation in personal factors influencing a sense of belonging; however, its existence alone is important given the impact it has on a student's overall motivation, effort, and ultimately achievement.

Finally, and given that this study focused on the belonging experiences of underrepresented first-year Muslim students, Strayhorn's (2012) work is quite fitting. Strayhorn (2012) discusses his approach to belonging being different from other researchers studying the phenomenon within higher education, stating that "it refers to students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group or others on campus" (p. 55). Strayhorn (2012) argues that a sense of belonging becomes critical in certain environments or social contexts, particularly for individuals whose identities are less likely to be supported or welcomed. Strayhorn (2012) outlines three specific pieces that are most influential to the study at hand. First, belonging is about perceived membership and "fit." Second and unlike the work of Tinto (1993), belonging does not equal integration and must include a component of feeling valued. Finally, administrators must move away from the notion that marginalized students are unsuccessful because they "lack" ability, instead, universities must focus on how they can enable marginalized students.

In summary, the theoretical framework, shown in Figure 1 guided this study (see Figure 1). In chapter three, I discuss how the theoretical framework built off the work of Maslow (1954), Goodenow (1993), and Strayhorn (2012) informed this study's questions, data collection, and data analysis.
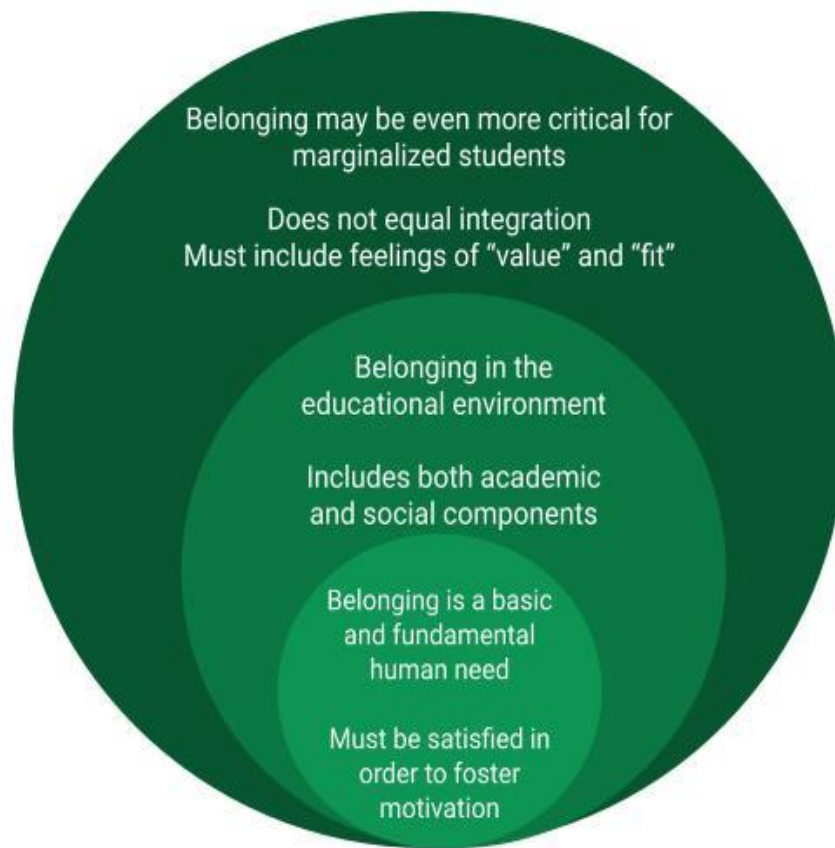
*Figure 1*. A theoretical framework based on the work of Maslow (1954), Goodenow (1993), and Strayhorn (2012).

The theoretical framework used in this study fills a gap in scholarship, concerning how first-year Muslim students experience a sense of belonging as this phenomenon has not previously been examined through the identified frameworks of Maslow (1954), Goodenow (1993), and Strayhorn (2012).

<div align="center"><em>Definition of Key Terms</em></div>

This section overviews a collection of terms that was compiled throughout the review of scholarly literature. An understanding of each of these terms will be helpful to readers seeking to understand this study.

*Eid:* Eid is short for Eid al-Fitr, which means the "festival of breaking the fast" and

occurs after Ramadan concludes. This is a time of celebration and charity for

Muslims (Winter & Williams, 2002).

*First-Year Student*: This is a student in their first year of academic coursework at an

institution of higher education and is defined as taking enough credit hours to be

considered full-time per the requirements as outlined by the University Registrar.

*Hijab:* A hijab is a veil or head-covering worn by Muslim women and a visible symbol of

adherence to the Islamic faith (Rockenbach et al., 2017).

*Islam:* Islam is a religion and a lifestyle derived from the Arabic word meaning,

"submission" and "peace." Followers of Islam believe in complete submission to God

(Winter & Williams, 2002).

*Islamophobia:* Islamophobia is discrimination and fear against Muslims and the religion

of Islam. Recent studies are classifying Islamophobia as a form of racism (Love,

2017).

*Microaggressions*: A term used to describe subtle and often unintentional statements or

actions of discrimination or prejudice against a person or persons of a marginalized

group (Nadal et al., 2012)

*Muslim Student:* A Muslim student is a student who practices Islam and is studying at an

institution of higher education.

*Ramadan:* Ramadan is a month of fasting, reflection, and prayer observed by Muslims

across the world each year (Winter & Williams, 2002).

*Retention:* Retention is a recognized indicator of institutional success. The percentage of

students that continue at the same institution of higher education in the fall semester

of their first and second year and is also known as the freshman-to-sophomore

retention rate (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2018).

*Sense of Belonging:* A sense of belonging is a basic human need referring to a person's fit

or involvement in a system or environment and their perceived value within that

system or environment, which directly affects motivation for higher-order outcomes

(Maslow, 1954; Goodenow, 1993; Strayhorn, 2012).

*Stereotype Threat:* This refers to the phenomenon of being aware that you belong to a

group that instills fear in others due to stereotypes related to your identity (Nasir &

Al-Amin, 2006).

*Conclusion*

Throughout this chapter, I overviewed the problem necessitating this study,

namely that in the time post 9/11, a continued misunderstanding and fear of Islam has led

to Muslims experiencing racism and marginalization in the United States (Rasheed Ali &

Bagheri, 2009). The focus of this study is critical given the current Islamophobic climate

in the United States coupled with the need for institutions of higher learning to become

better equipped to attend to the needs of a more diverse student body (Hoover, 2020;

Grawe, 2018; Jamal, 2017; Schaidle, 2016; Seggie & Sanford, 2010). Building up and

targeting supports for a more diverse student population positions institutions to facilitate

belonging and retain students (Strayhorn, 2012). I utilized the works of Maslow (1954),

Goodenow (1993), and Strayhorn (2012) to frame this phenomenological case study

focused on exploring the lived belonging experiences of first-year Muslim students.

Existing research on student belonging and the experiences of Muslim students within the

context of higher education are discussed in Chapter Two.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

*Introduction*

This chapter discusses the extant scholarly research focused on a sense of belonging within the college campus environment. It also seeks to highlight the experiences of Muslim students within American higher education. Four key sections comprise this literature review. The first section examines Islamophobia in the context of U. S. education. The second focuses on the concept of belonging and its importance in higher education. The third section overviews how various identities experience a sense of belonging. Finally, the fourth section examines religious identity and belonging. Together these sections argue that belonging is important to student success in college and that a student's identity influences how they experience belonging (Strayhorn, 2012; Tinto, 1993).

*Islamophobia in the United States and Education*

The current Islamophobic climate in the United States necessitates a differentiated approach to fostering belonging among first-year Muslim students in American higher education (Grawe, 2018; Jamal, 2017; Schaidle, 2016; Seggie & Sanford, 2010). Despite an increase in population and thus higher visibility of Muslim Americans, Islamophobia continues to grow in the United States, with nearly half of Americans holding negative perceptions toward Muslims (Schaidle, 2016) and over forty percent admitting to feeling prejudice toward Muslims (Ingraham, 2016). The sections that follow address

Islamophobia in the United States as well as how Islamophobia intersects with American education.

*Islamophobia in the United States*

U.S. Immigration and U.S. Census Bureau do not ask for religious affiliation as part of their documentation process; therefore, estimating the number of Muslims in the United States is difficult (Pew Research Center, 2011). An estimated, 1.8 million Muslim adults currently live in the United States (Pew Research Center, 2011). In total, Muslims of all ages make up approximately one percent of the U.S. population (Yoon-Ji Kang, 2019). Islam has grown to be the largest non-Christian identity in the United States and the second-largest religious identity in the world (Pew Research Center, 2015). There are some estimations that if trends continue on the same trajectory, Islam will grow to be the largest religion in the United States by the year 2200 (Cole & Ahmadi, 2010).

Since the 9/11 attacks, American Muslims have been targeted both through obvious acts of discrimination and through less obvious means, including institutionalized policies around homeland security (Asfari, 2017). The U.S. media often uses negative images of Muslims to further position Islam as the post 9/11 enemy of the West (Elbih, 2013; Zine, 2001). These images often present Muslims as violent and oppressive or committed to a lifestyle that is incompatible with American culture (Elbih, 2013). Elbih (2013) states:

> Men are portrayed as oil sheikhs with multiple wives and the women are portrayed as belly dancers or oppressed in harams. Fundamentalism is used to refer to a stereotype of Arabs and Muslims as terrorists, violent and irrational people (Naber, 2008). Together with the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the emergence of terrorist organizations, these images have assisted anti-Muslim figures in crafting Islamophobia to miseducate Americans about Islam and Muslims and their relation to the events of 9/11 and the War on Terror. As a result, a 2010 Time magazine poll shows that 55% of Americans do not

13

understand the teachings of Islam, 46% believe that it is a religion that supports violence, and 26% believe that Muslims in the United States are not patriotic Americans. (pp. 5–6)

Not only are these representations in the media offensive, but they are not accurate. Muslims in the United States, like other religious groups, are quite diverse (Nadal et al., 2012). Muslims in the U.S. include many different racial and ethnic groups and have been recorded as emigrating from 80 different countries (Nadal et al., 2012). Additionally, and in contrast to popular depictions, Muslims in the United States are more financially well off, educated, and younger than the overall population (Nadal et al., 2012).

Nadal et al. (2012) conducted a qualitative study to understand whether Muslims in the United States experienced religious microaggressions and to identify the types of microaggressions experienced. The results of the study indicated that Muslims regularly experience microaggressions across the following themes: depicting Muslims as terrorists, making assumptions of homogeneity, using Islamophobic language, engaging in exoticization, promoting religious inferiority, and not welcoming Muslims as true U.S. citizens and community members. The authors pointed out that microaggressions experienced by Muslims are complicated due to the heterogeneity across the population and may be due to race, ethnicity, gender, or a combination of these identities (Nadal et al., 2012).

A 2019 study released through the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding indicated that discrimination against and fear of Muslims is on the rise in the U.S. (Yoon-Ji Kang, 2019). The study found that 62% of Muslims in the U.S. experienced religious discrimination in 2019 (Ziabari & Kundnani, 2020). Additionally, the study reported

those with personal connections to a Muslim individual scored lower on the Islamophobia Index while those with Islamophobic views were not likely to know a Muslim person (Yoon-Ji Kang, 2019). The study also pointed out that having knowledge of Islam was a strong predictor for lower levels of Islamophobia (Yoon-Ji Kang, 2019). In the section that follows, Islamophobia within the context of U.S. education is explored.

*Islamophobia in Education*

Students entering today's American colleges do not know a world before 9/11. This is important to note, as many students come to American colleges already exposed to both subtle and obvious forms of prejudice towards Muslims from their time of birth. Further, the Pew Research Center (2017) reports that a majority of Americans do not personally know someone that identifies as Muslim. A study conducted by Rockenbach et al. (2017) sought to understand how non-Muslim college students perceived Muslim students on campus. The study utilized a quantitative approach and gathered data from over 50 colleges and universities over three years (Rockenbach et al., 2017). The findings suggested religious-majority students, as well as male and Asian American students; have lower levels of appreciation for Muslim-identifying students on campus (Rockenbach et al., 2017). The authors believed that the students from religious-majority backgrounds are likely coming to the campus with little to no previous exposure to individuals who are Muslim (Rockenbach et al., 2017).

As such, it is reasonable to deduce that many Americans base their perceptions and understanding of Islam on media portrayals (Nadal et al., 2012). One study (Persson & Musher-Eizenman, 2005) found that prejudice towards Muslims among White college students is positively correlated with exposure to US news sources. Gay (2002) asserts

that mass media is the only source of information and knowledge related to ethnic diversity for some students. Additionally, she shares that information seen on television may be more influential than what is learned in the classroom which is disturbing since much of this "knowledge" is inaccurate, stereotypical, or prejudicial (Gay, 2002). In essence, college students have been surrounded by messaging that is likely to promote fear and negative perceptions of Muslims.

The lower appreciation of and prejudice towards Muslims in American society is reinforced by the Islamophobic curriculum in schools and universities in the U.S. (Elbih, 2013). Textbooks and pedagogical practice create challenges for Muslim students when educators do not facilitate discussions to promote accurate understandings of 9/11, the War on Terror, and the ongoing conflict between Palestine and Israel (Elbih, 2013). Requests to remove Islamic doctrine from texts and curricula mean that Muslim perspectives are not frequently represented in the classroom (Elbih, 2013). Muslim students are impacted by how Islam is portrayed—or not—in their lessons and textbooks oftentimes in negative ways.

Further complicating this situation is classroom discussions on religion and politics can be especially challenging for Muslim students (Faraj, 2019). A 2006 study found that Muslim students are least comfortable discussing issues related to religion when compared to their non-Muslim peers (Bryant, 2006, as cited in Faraj, 2019). This discomfort is likely linked to Muslim students' fear of being misunderstood by their peers (Faraj, 2019). As such, Muslim students must reconcile their self-identification as Muslim and fit with mainstream American culture (Elbih, 2013). This reconciliation can require students to reject their Muslim identities to fit in (Elbih, 2013).

Muslim Americans report higher levels of enrollment in college or university classes (26%) compared to 13% of the general public (Pew Research Center, 2011). "Islam can no longer be considered a non-Western religion and Muslims are no longer 'them.' They are 'us'" (Seggie & Sanford, 2010, p.63). As the population of Muslims in the United States continues to increase, it behooves institutions of higher education to consider religious identity when thinking through how best to support student retention.

*Sense of Belonging in Education*

In this section, the concept of belonging as well as its importance and relationship to higher education is explored. A key priority for institutions of higher education is the retention of students. Keeping students enrolled is one of the primary goals of colleges and universities in the United States, largely due to the impact of enrollment on institutional revenue and operations (O'Keeffe, 2013). Attrition rates for first-year students in the United States have been estimated between 30–50% (American Institutes for Research, 2010, as cited in O'Keeffe, 2013). A staggering 22% of first-year students do not return to their institution for a second year (Morrow & Ackermann, 2012). When looking at student departures from college, the majority of those departures take place between the first and second years (Tinto, 1993).

Student sense of belonging is positively linked to academic achievement, motivation, retention, and persistence (Rhee, 2008 as cited in Strayhorn, 2012). The first few weeks on a college campus are known to be critical in terms of the social and academic integration of students (Morrow & Ackermann, 2012). Students that have trouble fitting in or experience rejection are at greater risk of attrition; thus, creating a sense of belonging for students is critical to their ability to persist and continue in higher

education (O'Keeffe, 2013; Strayhorn, 2012). For first-year students, in particular, developing belonging is essential to their success on campus (O'Keeffe, 2013; Strayhorn, 2012). Strayhorn (2012) states:

> Sense of belonging is context-dependent, takes on heightened significance in settings perceived as unfamiliar or foreign, and likely changes over time and place. All of these seem to be important considerations, given the precarious situation of first-time entering freshmen who tend to perceive college as new or foreign. (p.55)

Given that a student's first year in college is so closely linked to retention, institutions have taken on the responsibility of creating opportunities to foster belonging among students (O'Keeffe, 2013; Strayhorn, 2012). Historically colleges and universities have focused on creating belonging through the implementation of mentorship programs, one-on-one advising models, and extracurricular programs like student organizations, fraternities, sororities, and club sports (O'Keeffe, 2013; Strayhorn, 2012). Despite the time and resources universities and colleges have employed to onboard new students and create opportunities for fostering belonging, there remains much to be understood about belonging and its specific determinants. Much of the existing research centers on the experiences of individuals and not the role of the institution in belonging (Strayhorn, 2012).

In his famous and seminal 1943 publication, Abraham Maslow proposed the hierarchy of needs theory for human motivation. Maslow's (1954) publication fully describes his theory, which describes a set of hierarchical needs that every person possesses: physiological, safety, social, respect, and self-actualization. The needs at each level must be satisfied before the person's desire for the next level of needs is activated. After physiological needs such as food, water, and shelter are the second level of need

which includes safety and security. Once basic physiological and safety needs are met, a

person's needs are then focused on fulfilling their sense of belonging (Maslow, 1954).

Maslow (1954) writes:

> At this point, individuals will strive to belong, to fit in, to connect with others, to make friends, motivated by the unsatisfied hunger for contact, intimacy (in a literal sense), and community. Until the need to belong is gratified, other (and higher) needs (e.g., self-actualization) cannot gain ascendency or may become simply non-existent or be pushed to the background. (p. 16)

There is a remarkable parallel between the higher-order outcomes defined in Maslow's

(1954) model and the overall mission of higher education.

At the pinnacle of Maslow's (1954) model is self-actualization, the concept of

realizing one's potential and seeking personal growth experiences. One can quickly see

the value of fostering a sense of belonging as a means for increasing the motivation of

students to succeed and seek self-actualization in the University setting. Research

indicates when students' needs are not met, their motivation and development are

negatively impacted, which ultimately impacts their overall success on campus (Deci &

Ryan, 2000, as cited in Strayhorn, 2012).

Building upon the work of Maslow (1954) is Astin's (1984) theory of

involvement that ties student involvement on campus with the likelihood of persistence in

college. Astin's (1984) theory encourages educators to focus on student involvement—

what a student does and how they spend their time on campus. Involvement in campus

activities, on-campus jobs, undergraduate research, and ROTC are all opportunities for

students to spend time on campus and connect with one another. Connecting with others

on campus is critical to student retention and Astin (1984) challenges administrators to

create opportunities for students to develop relationships with one another and their campus communities.

Reinforcing Astin's (1984) work is that of Tinto (1993) that emphasized the need for both academic and social integration as a means for their academic success and continued persistence. Tinto (1993) is one of the most pervasive, enduring, and cited theories for understanding undergraduate student departure and persistence (Braxton, 2019. Both Astin's (1984) and Tinto's (1993) theories are united in the concept that involvement and social integration are paramount to student persistence in college. Despite the popularity of Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure, it is not without criticism. The model has received pushback based on its overall emphasis on the individual student's responsibility to assimilate into the college environment and as reinforcing to non-White people that they must adjust themselves to the values and privileges of White culture to be successful (Tierney, 1992). Braxton et al. (1997) criticized the theory for not having empirical backing and for its questionable application at commuter campuses.

Hagerty et al. (1992) analyzed the construct of a sense of belonging. They determined that before a person experiences a sense of belonging, there are three defined precursors: energy for involvement, desire for meaningful involvement, and potential for shared characteristics (Hagerty et al., 1992). Hagerty et al. (1992) also laid out three consequences or outcomes for people experiencing belonging: involvement through social, spiritual, physical, or psychological means; assignment of meaning to involvement, and establishment of a foundation for future emotions and behaviors. In summary, this model demonstrates that individuals must first have a desire and energy for

belonging and that once they experience belonging, there is a foundation for continued involvement emotionally and behaviorally (Hagerty et al., 1992).

There is a rich foundation of scholarship committed to understanding the phenomenon of belonging; however, there does not exist a single, agreed-upon definition. Hagerty and Patusky (1995) sought to address this need through their development of the Sense of Belonging Inventory (SOBI) a 27-item, self-report instrument capturing the psychological experience of belonging. Their inventory defines belonging as coupling identity with perceived fit and value in an ecosystem and has been critical in allowing researchers to use a quantitative approach to understanding belonging (Hagerty & Patusky, 1995).

Around this same time, Lee and Robbins (1995) developed the Social Connectedness Scale and the Social Assurance Scale to measure belongingness. Their scale was first tested on a sample of over 600 college students and divided belongingness into three categories: companionship, affiliation, and connectedness (Lee & Robbins, 1995). Companionship is described as a relationship with a single person such as a parent, sibling, best friend, and can change over time (Lee & Robbins, 1995, as cited in Vincent, 2016). Within a college setting, students may develop individual friendships with others based on personal characteristics, values, beliefs, and cultural backgrounds (Vincent, 2016). Affiliation is an important aspect of belonging and includes aligning oneself with a group or association of peers (Lee & Robbins, 1995). Some students may struggle to participate in group activities that promote affiliation because they have not yet established companionship or are more comfortable with individual relationships (Lee & Robbins, 1995). The last category in Lee and Robbins' (1995) belonging constructs is

connectedness. Connectedness is only achieved after a person fulfills companionship and affiliation. It is in the connectedness phase that a person has increased social confidence and can seek deeper levels of connectedness by embracing differences and going past surface-level relationships (Lee & Robbins, 1995). Within higher education, connectedness involves relationships between both peers and the larger university community (Vincent, 2016).

Relatedly, a 2014 study by Gerrard and Billington looked at the concept of belonging among nursing students that chose to participate in extracurricular groups on campus. Findings from the study indicated that participants chose to be a part of the student groups for reasons of personal gain, employability, and retention. Participants shared that belonging to the group brought benefits that enabled their overall success as students such as forming friendships that enabled them to feel valued and supported (Gerrard & Billington, 2014). Participants reported that they had intrinsic motivations to join a group outside of class (Gerrard & Billington, 2014). This study reinforces the important role that motivation plays in a student's need to belong on campus and further highlights the responsibility institutions have in creating support systems that promote opportunities for belonging.

Throughout this section, I described how a sense of belonging is a critical factor in student retention and success on campus (Astin, 1984; Gerrard & Billington, 2014; O'Keeffe, 2013; Strayhorn, 2012; Tinto, 1993). Existing research points to the responsibility of institutions to create opportunities for student engagement within the campus community and appropriately prepare students to participate in those

opportunities (O'Keeffe, 2013; Strayhorn, 2012). The next section explores how identity

influences student belonging experiences on college campuses.

*Sense of Belonging and Identity*

The need to belong fluctuates with environment and situation and becomes

increasingly important in unfamiliar, challenging, or transitional contexts (Strayhorn,

2012) such as a student's first year on campus. As stated previously, there are critics of

Tinto's (1993) theory of undergraduate student departure and persistence. Critics have

largely focused on Tinto's (1993) assertion that students are most successful when they

can adjust and adapt to the campus environment. To be clear, the underlying assertion is

that students must assimilate to the dominant and far-reaching White culture found on

U.S. college campuses. For many non-White students, adjustment to the college

environment may be especially challenging and isolating as the institutional environment

may not be supportive or welcoming (Tachine et al., 2017; Tierney, 1992).

Nancy Schlossberg (1989) focused her research on the concepts of mattering and

marginality within the college student experience. Schlossberg (1989) identified

mattering as the idea of others depending on one another, being interested in one another,

and being concerned with one another's collective fate. She further defined marginality

as experiencing the opposite—as not fitting in or belonging (Schlossberg, 1989).

Schlossberg (1989) emphasizes that the potential for feelings of marginality rise during

times of transition. She goes on to state, "The larger the difference between the former

role and the new role the more marginal a person may feel" (Schlossberg, 1989, p.7).

Schlossberg (1989) lays the foundation for Strayhorn (2012) who argues that a sense of

belonging is a basic human need, but that for marginalized people belonging has greater

importance. Strayhorn (2012) states the following regarding a student's sense of belonging in college: "it refers to students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group or others on campus" (p. 55). Unlike Maslow (1954) and other earlier researchers focused on student retention and belonging, Strayhorn (2012) is clear that identity influences how a student experiences belonging in college.

There is a growing body of literature to support Strayhorn's (2012) position that underrepresented students experience belonging at greater levels of uncertainty (Gopalan & Brady, 2020). Gopalan and Brady (2020) conducted, for the first time, a national study focused on the belonging experiences of college students. Data were collected from first-time, first-year students in the U.S. with a 2-year follow-up and asked students to report on whether they felt part of their school. The study reinforced past studies with smaller samples in its finding that underrepresented students at 4-year colleges reported lower levels of belonging than their peers (Gopalan & Brady, 2020). The following studies highlight how identity may influence the belonging experiences of students on a college campus.

Gloria et al. (2005) focused their research on Latino undergraduate college students. They found Latino students that did not experience a fit between their cultural values and the university environment demonstrated a higher intention to depart or drop out of the institution compared to their White peers (Gloria et al., 2005). The Gloria et al. (2005) study highlights the consequences that occur when a group of marginalized students does not experience belonging at an institution. Hurtado and Carter's (1997)

statement, "Sense of belonging is particularly meaningful to those who perceive themselves as marginal to the mainstream life [of college]" (p. 324 as cited in Strayhorn, 2012), further captures the importance of belonging in student retention. Student affairs practitioners and university administrators must acknowledge that a sense of belonging is critical to the success of underrepresented students on their campuses.

Tachine et al. (2017) make the case that sense of belonging is more than simply integrating students into the system of an institution but must also include cultural validation. Their study used a culturally relevant form of data collection by way of a Native American sharing circle. This methodology aligned with other forms of qualitative data collection in which participants shared their lived experiences. Among their findings was the concept that institutions must support and reflect interpersonal and structural validation or recognition of culture beyond the White majority for underrepresented minority students to experience belonging (Tachine et al., 2017).

A 2011 study by Museus and Maramba examined cultural factors and their influence on the sense of belonging among Filipino American college students. Their study used survey data and yielded findings that student adjustment to college positively related to a sense of belonging (Museus & Maramba, 2011). Students reported a negative relationship between adjustment to college and pressure to ignore or sever ties with their cultural background or identity (Museus & Maramba, 2011).

Building upon the findings of Tachine et al. (2017) and that of Museus and Maramba (2011) is the work of Cabrera et al. (1999). Cabrera et al. (1999) looked at how perceptions of prejudice and discrimination on campus influence the transition to college for White and African American students. The study looked at approximately 1400

undergraduate students across 18 institutions in the United States. Participants completed a survey focused on understanding perceptions of prejudice and discrimination across two constructs: social environment and academic environment. The findings indicated that for both African American and White students, parental support and encouragement played a significant role in students' decisions to persist. The role of family support was especially impactful in the persistence of African American students (Cabrera et al., 1999). The study also found that while perceptions of prejudice and discrimination had negative impacts on institutional commitment for both African American and White students; however, the impact for African American students was particularly detrimental (Cabrera et al., 1999). Universities need to find ways to support, respect, and integrate the cultural backgrounds of students.

The findings from these studies reinforce the work of Ladson-Billings (1995) in which she describes the need for educators to create critical pedagogy that enables students to maintain their cultural integrity while succeeding academically. Ladson-Billings (1995) focused her research on the experiences of successful African American students and states, "the dilemma for African American students becomes one of negotiating the academic demands of school while demonstrating cultural competence. Thus, culturally relevant pedagogy must provide a way for students to maintain their cultural integrity while succeeding academically" (p. 476). Culturally relevant pedagogy reframes curriculum to value and center the diverse backgrounds and experiences that students bring to the classroom. Within the classroom, educators are challenged to create experiences that are learner-centered and recognize the individual assets that each student brings forward (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Student affairs practitioners, faculty, and

university administrators must recognize that there is not a one-size-fits-all approach to how students experience belonging (Strayhorn, 2012; Tachine et al., 2017; Tierney 1992). The concept of culturally relevant pedagogy must be applied outside of the classroom and across institutions of higher education. Students' experiences of belonging are unique and institutional programming and supports must be tailored to meet the diverse needs of students.

<p style="text-align: center;">*Sense of Belonging and Religious Identity*</p>

Several studies support that various identity groups experience belonging differently (Tachine et al., 2017). This section discusses the research on how religious identity impacts belonging. As noted earlier in this text, considerable research explores student experiences by identity; however, these studies do not frequently consider religious diversity (Bowman & Small, 2012; Bowman & Smedley, 2013).

One such study by Bowman and Smedley (2013) explored the degree to which religious affiliation affects student satisfaction in college. This quantitative longitudinal study looked across 28 institutions and over 3,000 students. Findings from the study indicate that Protestant Christian students have the highest satisfaction with their collegiate experience (Bowman & Smedley, 2013). Students who do not identify with any religious group have the lowest satisfaction and students from religious minorities, including Muslims, fall in the middle (Bowman & Smedley, 2013). Bowman and Smedley (2013) found that there was a consistent negative relationship between religious minorities and satisfaction; however, they did not specifically call out the satisfaction levels of Muslim students in their results.

Bowman and Small (2012) recognized the need to understand the college experiences of religious minorities and conducted a longitudinal quantitative study to understand religious affiliation and well-being. The study utilized data from over 14,000 students across over 130 campuses in the US (Bowman & Small, 2012). The findings from the study indicate that religious minority students demonstrate lower levels of wellbeing at Christian institutions than at secular institutions, likely due to the privileging and promotion of Christianity, which can lead to feelings of isolation among religious minority students (Bowman & Small, 2012). The study also revealed that students who engaged in religious activities demonstrated a greater sense of well-being, as these activities often facilitate socialization, friendship, and a greater sense of purpose (Bowman & Small, 2012). Though this study did not specifically look at the well-being of Muslim students, it does provide greater insight into the collegiate experiences of religious minority students. Additionally, Bowman and Small's (2012) study provides insight into the importance of religious engagement on campus and lays the groundwork for an understanding of religious engagement and belonging.

In recent years, researchers have sought to understand the campus-based experiences of Muslim students (Asmar et al., 2004; Cole & Ahmadi, 2003; Dimandja, 2017; Rangoonwala et al., 2011; Seggie & Sanford, 2010; Swisher, 2019); however, these studies have primarily focused on the Muslim student population writ large or have broken the population down by gender or international status. Seggie and Sanford (2010) and Swisher (2019) focused their work specifically on the experiences of Muslim women on campus. Seggie and Sanford (2010) conducted a qualitative study focused on how veiled Muslim women experience college and how their practice of wearing traditional

Muslim hijab makes their religious identity more visible to the campus community. Participants in Seggie and Sanford's (2010) study indicated a preference for relationships with other Muslim women, as they did not have to explain themselves and generally felt more comfortable. Additionally, the study indicates that there are some challenges with navigating social interactions with the opposite sex and social situations where alcohol is present that can lead Muslim students to socialize primarily within their religious community (Seggie & Sanford, 2010).

Swisher's (2019) qualitative study reinforced the importance of access to in-group members by focusing on gendered Islamophobia and the sense of belonging experiences of visibly Muslim women on American college campuses. Participants reported feelings of misfit, otherness, and a desire to transfer due to the lack of diversity on their campuses (Swisher, 2019). On the other hand, the study participants spoke about the role of the Muslim Student Association (MSA) in building community and providing access to in-group members (Swisher, 2019). A 2011 study by Rangoonwala et al. shared similar findings. Rangoonwala et al. (2011) reported that Muslim women that decided to veil had greater success in their transition to campus, as they were able to quickly identify and connect with women that shared their values and cultural practices. These findings reinforce the Pew Research Center's Muslim American Survey (2011) in which Muslim Americans that identify as highly committed to their religion are more likely to have a close circle of friends that consists mostly of other Muslims. This practice is more common among Muslim women than among Muslim men (Pew Research Center, 2011).

The preference to interact with other Muslims could make sense when one considers other research on the experiences of Muslim students on college campuses. A

2006 study by Bryant (as cited in Rockenbach et al., 2017) indicates that Muslim students may be less inclined to or less comfortable discussing their faith practices compared to their non-Muslim colleagues. Given the Islamophobic climate, their inclination to disengage from discussions of faith practices is a form of self-preservation or protection from microaggressions or discrimination. Muslim students consistently report a need to represent Islam positively both in the classroom and in social settings (Nasir & Al-Amin, 2006; Rockenbach et al., 2017; Seggie & Sanford, 2010). Specifically, Muslim students describe having to navigate negative stereotypes of Islam, including "Muslim terrorist" and "oppressed Muslim woman" and feeling extra pressure to personally and actively work against society's negative perceptions of Muslims (Nasir & Al-Amin, 2006; Seggie & Sanford, 2010). Researchers describe a "stereotype threat" as the phenomenon of being aware that one's identity is part of a group that instills fear in others due to stereotypes (Nasir & Al-Amin, 2006). One can only assume that moving through the world believing that others are afraid of you would lead to feelings of isolation and marginalization.

A study by Cole and Ahmadi (2010) looked at Muslim student identity as a factor in academic success and satisfaction with their college experience. The researchers employed a quantitative longitudinal study using data from students' first and fourth years in college and compared experiences between Christian, Jewish, and Muslim identifying students (Cole & Ahmadi, 2010). Overall, Muslim students reported higher frequencies of attendance at cultural awareness activities as well as interactions with people that identify as racially and culturally different from them (Cole & Ahmadi, 2010). There were no significant differences in academic success found between Muslim students and their Christian or Jewish peers; however, there was a difference in overall

academic student satisfaction between Muslim and Jewish students, with Muslim students reporting lower levels of satisfaction (Cole & Ahmadi, 2010). The results of this study highlight the complexity of the Muslim student experience. Other research has suggested that when students are engaged in diversity-related activities, they tend to have greater academic gains and satisfaction with their learning experiences (Cole & Ahmadi, 2010). The results from Cole and Ahmadi's (2010) study confirm the outcomes of prior studies that indicate Muslim students carry a self-imposed responsibility to represent their identity group positively in the classroom that over time may have negative impacts on their overall satisfaction levels.

Bowman and Smedley (2013) argue that although overall satisfaction levels of religious minority students are lower than their Christian peers are, religious minority students can better navigate college campuses because their minoritized identities are invisible or less identifiable and therefore are likely to experience fewer acts of discrimination or microaggressions. This theory may be true and warrants further exploration, particularly considering recent conversations defining Islamophobia as a form of racism (Love, 2017). It is important to note that regardless of the frequency in which a student experiences prejudice or discrimination, overall student outcomes are negatively impacted when there is pressure to hide or conceal parts of their identity (Bowman & Smedley, 2013).

Some research suggests that younger generations may cope or adapt to conflicts between their religious identity and societal norms by "watering down" or becoming more fluid in their religious identity (Bauman, 2004, as cited in de Souza, 2016). A 2003 (Cole & Ahmadi) study of a large campus in the Midwest found Muslim women students

decided to de-veil to better integrate with the campus. They chose to remove their headscarf or hijab so as not to face further alienation by their fellow students. Koller (2015) describes the hijab as,

> The most visible religious and political symbol of Islam in the United States and abroad...simultaneously viewed as a tool of female oppression, a symbol of defiance, or a personal representation of religious and spiritual obedience, the hijab is a modern lightning rod for both Muslims and non-Muslims alike. (p. 60)

Koller's (2015) description of the hijab gets at the heart of what is challenging about being a Muslim American today. Because there are so many assumptions made about Islam, Muslim Americans are constantly feeling the pressures of those biases and expectations as they navigate the world.

The idea that concealing part of one's identity has negative impacts on student success is supported through Rangoonwala et al.'s (2011) finding that Muslim women that chose not to veil had a more difficult time transitioning to college in comparison to their peers that chose to wear a hijab, as they had a more difficult time making social connections. Rangoonwala et al. (2011) focused their research on understanding the transition to college for Muslim women choosing to adhere to Islamic dress requirements. Many Muslims value modesty for both genders and see it as a form of prevention, as it is unlawful under Islamic guidelines to interact between opposite genders (Rangoonwala et al., 2011). For Muslim women, the use of a hijab, or headscarf, helps in covering their hair, ears, neck, and chest (Rangoonwala et al., 2011). Rangoonwala et al. (2011) utilized a quantitative approach in which participants answered a 30-minute survey looking at their religious observance and faith-based behaviors related to campus life. The results determined that Muslim students that adhered to Islamic dress requirements identified as adjusting to college better. This correlation may be because wearing a hijab makes a

student more visible and potentially able to connect easier with others that share similar values, which in turn provides a level of support and community for students (Ragoonwala et al., 2011).

Many of the nation's institutions, including those designed as secular, are rooted in a Christian tradition (Bowman & Smedley, 2013). As such, Christian symbols and traditions serve as frequent reminders of Christian privilege on today's college campus (Bowman & Smedley, 2013). Muslim holidays are not often recognized, and college and university academic calendars continue to be very Christian centered with large breaks that tend to align with the Christian holidays of Christmas and Easter. The Muslim holidays of Ramadan or Eid are especially important to the community and are often overlooked and unacknowledged by non-Muslims (Swisher, 2019). Ramadan designates a month-long period of daytime fasting, reflection, prayer, and community for Muslims. Eid celebrates the end of Ramadan and generally involves prayer, charity, celebratory meals throughout the day, and time with family. Several studies have shown that Muslim students become frustrated or discouraged by the lack of understanding of Islam exhibited by their non-Muslim colleagues, including students and faculty (Koller, 2015; Rockenbach et al., 2017; Swisher, 2019). Reports indicate that many student affairs practitioners and university administrators are not well versed or knowledgeable of the world's major religions (Bowman & Small, 2012).

This section overviewed the body of scholarship focused on a sense of belonging and religious identity. There is a growing interest in the religious identities of college students, but to date, there has not been a focus on how various religious identities experience a sense of belonging or what differences might exist. A body of scholarship

does exist around the college experiences of Muslim students (Cole & Ahmadi, 2010; Koller, 2015; Nasir & Al-Amin, 2006; Rangoonwala et al., 2011; Rockenbach et al., 2017; Seggie & Sanford, 2010; Swisher, 2019), but none with a focus on understanding the lived experiences of first-year Muslim students. Additionally, within the research reviewed there do not exist any studies that use the theoretical frameworks of Maslow (1954), Goodenow (1993), or Strayhorn (2012).

*Conclusion*

The transition to college from high school can be significant, and a gap currently exists in the research concerning the experience of first-year Muslim students transitioning to college and establishing a sense of belonging. Given the existing research supporting challenges faced by Muslim students in navigating non-Muslim environments, it is important to explore their experiences of belonging during a critical time for student development generally (Strayhorn, 2012). Muslim students have reported that they would continue at their college or university so long as the campus climate is perceived to be supportive and welcoming of Muslim students (Seggie & Sanford, 2012).

Throughout this literature review, the concept of belonging and its importance to student success in college was discussed. (O'Keeffe, 2013; Strayhorn, 2012). The scholarship then focused on how students of various identities experience belonging and the research that has proven that belonging is even more critical for the success of students that belong to minority or marginalized groups (Strayhorn, 2012; Tachine et al., 2017; Tierney, 1992). This research demonstrates the need for colleges and universities to prioritize a sense of belonging for all students, particularly those that identify outside of the majority. Historically researchers have focused less on religious identity and its

interaction with the student experience on a college campus (Bowman & Small, 2012; Bowman & Smedley, 2013). Even more limited than research on religious identity and the college experience, is research that focuses on the experiences of Muslim students in college.

The limited research that does exist focuses on the experiences of international Muslim students or gender-specific experiences of Muslim students. There is seemingly little to no research that focuses specifically on the first-year experiences of Muslim students in the United States. This study explored the experiences of first-year Muslim students during a time that is critical to their educational experience, as it is understood that most student departures take place between the first and second year of college (Tinto, 1993). The timing of this study is critical given the increased pressure on institutions of higher education to recruit and retain a more diverse student body (Grawe, 2018) and the current Islamophobic climate in the United States (Asfari, 2017; Ingraham, 2016; Schaidle, 2016). In Chapter Three, the methodology for this study is overviewed.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

*Introduction*

I utilized a qualitative research approach to explore how first-year, undergraduate Muslim students experience belonging on a college campus in the northeastern United States. Specifically, I utilized a phenomenological case study in which I explored "the common meaning of experiences of a phenomenon (or topic or concept) for several individuals" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 314). In this study, I leaned on interviews, photo-elicitation, and reflection statements to interpret and share the lived belonging experiences of several first-year Muslim students. The use of case studies allowed me to focus deeply on the complexities and interactions of a particular context—first-year Muslim students at a mid-sized private, urban university in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania so that the phenomenon of "belonging" was described. This qualitative approach is interpretive and supports the belief that reality is experienced individually (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In the sections that follow, I detail all components of the research study including, but not limited to, the design and rationale, theoretical framework, data collection and analysis procedures, and validation strategies. As previously described, this study adds to existing research on student belonging within the college environment. Specifically, this study explores and documents how first-year Muslim students experience a sense of belonging. The focus of this study is critical given the current Islamophobic climate in the United States coupled with the need for institutions of higher learning to become better equipped to attend to the needs of a more diverse student body

(Grawe, 2018; Jamal, 2017; Schaidle, 2016; Seggie & Sanford, 2010). The research

questions guiding this study are consistent with a qualitative study design in that they are

broad and designed to explore a central phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). More

specifically, the research questions focus on the why and how of human interactions and

seek to uncover the lived experiences and perspectives of individuals or groups of people

(Agee, 2008). The following primary research question directs this study: How do first-

year Muslim undergraduate students at an urban university in the northeastern United

States describe their sense of belonging on campus? Further narrowing this study, are the

following secondary research questions:

1.      What are the key components/experiences contributing to first-year Muslim
        students' sense of belonging?

2.      What conditions/experiences contribute to first-year Muslim students feeling
        unconnected or unwelcome as if they do not belong?

3.      How do first-year Muslim students describe their feelings of belonging in the
        classroom?

4.      How do first-year Muslim students describe their sense of belonging outside of
        the classroom?

*Researcher Perspective*

In this section, I overview my perspective, as there is a general understanding and

acknowledgment that "a researcher's background and position will affect what they

choose to investigate, the angle of investigation, the methods judged most adequate for

this purpose, the findings considered most appropriate, and the framing and

communication of the conclusions" (Malterud, 2001, pp. 483–484). It is with this

understanding in mind, that I share the following insights into my life.

I identify as a White woman in my late thirties and as a practicing Roman Catholic. I received much of my formal education in the Northeastern and Mid-Atlantic regions of the United States. Professionally, I have worked within the field of higher education for the last fifteen years, specifically in the area of student affairs. My practical work has always included supporting student involvement and community building outside of the classroom. For the last five years, and in my current role as Associate Vice President and Dean of Student Life, I have been responsible for the oversight of the Spiritual and Religious Life program, including the supervision of the University Chaplains team on my campus.

Aside from experiencing a very limited number of microaggressions toward Catholicism, I have never considered my religious identity to have a negative effect on how others perceive me. In my professional role, I am responsible for reviewing religious accommodation requests from students for housing and dining on my campus. It is through this work that I have developed a heightened awareness of religious diversity and the lack of discussion around religious and spiritual identity, particularly at secular institutions, as it relates to the overall student experience. The awareness I have gained through working with students from a variety of religious backgrounds prompted my interest in exploring the belonging experiences of first-year Muslim students.

My employment also shapes my perspective on the social and academic experience of students in higher education. I believe that there may be a lack of congruence between the dominant culture on American college campuses and the faith-based practices of some Muslim students. Specifically, the dominant social experience of undergraduate students includes alcohol in social settings, dating and social relationships

38

between men and women, and other behaviors that may not align with Muslim culture. This misalignment, along with other factors, influences student belonging.

I conducted this study at the place of my employment, which makes me an insider researcher. Research conducted within the community or identity group of the researcher is considered insider research (Kanuha, 2000). Being an insider researcher has some benefits. As an insider researcher, I could quickly recognize my participants' lingo and references. Additionally, as a member of the greater University community, I was able to quickly connect with the participants and put them at ease. Kanuha (2000) states,

> On the other hand, one must not assume that being an insider to a cultural group necessarily means that the insider researcher has intimate knowledge of the particular and situated experiences of all members of the group or that generalizations can or should be made about the knowledge the researcher holds about her own culture. (p. 443)

While being an insider afforded me some advantages, I needed to balance that by taking specific steps to distance myself throughout the study (Kanuha, 2000). As an example, before each interview, I informed the participant that I might not engage or react to their statements in the same way that I might if we were having a normal conversation. I also let each participant know that he or she could be truthful with me without concern of retribution.

My axiological stance positions student belonging and inclusion as central to the educational experience. I believe wholeheartedly that a sense of belonging and connection to others within the campus community enables student retention and success. I am convinced that colleges and universities must focus on creating belonging opportunities for students with marginalized identities. By focusing on the fray, institutions will naturally capture the students in the middle and create a more inclusive

environment overall. Further, I embrace an ontological position that promotes the notion that reality is unique to the person experiencing the phenomenon. This position aligns with the purpose of Creswell and Poth's (2018) position that qualitative research captures and shares different realities and views.

I am aware that being a White, Christian, woman places me in one of the most privileged categories in the United States. The privileges afforded through my identity compel me to utilize my position and voice to illuminate the experiences of marginalized and misunderstood identity groups. Through this study, I explored and captured the phenomenon of belonging within a specific population of college students—first-year Muslim students—so that institutional efforts, resources, and services can be more effectively allocated and targeted.

*Theoretical Framework*

For this study, I pulled on the work of Maslow (1954), Goodenow (1993), and Strayhorn (2012) to guide the overall research design, frame the primary and secondary research questions, and shape the data collection and analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Yin, 1994; Anfara & Mertz, 2014). The previously described framework lays out how belonging is a fundamental human need that influences student motivation (Goodenow, 1993; Maslow, 1954; Strayhorn, 2012). Further, a multitude of factors both in and out of the classroom influence belonging, which goes beyond simple integration into the institution (Goodenow, 1993; Strayhorn, 2012).

Goodenow (1993) and Strayhorn (2012) approach their work with a constructivist view, a stance that emphasizes that knowledge and meaning-making are shaped by how people make sense of their individual experiences (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). The

constructivist approach by Goodenow (1993) and Strayhorn (2012) supports that

belonging, as a construct, is unique and individual factors may influence how a person

experiences it. The primary and secondary research questions acknowledge that first-year

Muslim students may experience belonging uniquely and reflect a constructivist position.

Further, Goodenow's (1993) PSSM instrument prompted me to consider how

multifaceted the university experience is, and thus the secondary research questions seek

to drill deeper into how both academic and social environments may influence the

belonging experiences of first-year Muslim students.

Influencing the collection of data in this study was the anti-deficit approach

utilized by Strayhorn (2012) in his exploration of the belonging experiences of

marginalized students. Strayhorn (2012) emphasized that practitioners must stop looking

at marginalized students as not capable. Instead, university administrators and faculty

must focus their efforts on building up environments and systems to support the success

of these students on campus. Gonyo (2016) further emphasizes the need to take on an

anti-deficit approach in her statement,

> By approaching these students to learn about their knowledge and experiences
> instead of focusing on what is "wrong" with them, scholars and practitioners are
> better able to understand what it is about their environment that has led to their
> lack of engagement. For those students that one might consider "successful," it is
> important to consider the things that led to their success to aid scholars and
> practitioners who work towards improving programs and policies in higher
> education. (p. 63)

As I thought about Strayhorn's (2012) approach, I recognized the importance of creating

an interview protocol that allowed me to build rapport with the participants so that they

were more willing to share openly about their lived experiences. I also integrated a photo-

elicitation and reflection exercise into the data collection so that participants were able to

describe their experiences using more than words. This multi-pronged approach supported participants that may have been less articulate or comfortable sharing verbally on the spot, as it provided the opportunity to reflect and then write a response and share photos representing their experience.

Finally, the theoretical framework influenced the overall data analysis for this study. As previously noted, Strayhorn (2012) approached student belonging through an anti-deficit lens. This means that rather than looking at students as "at-risk," the researcher focuses on the successes of students to shape future practice and theory (Gonyo, 2016). Like Strayhorn (2012), Harper (2009) also promotes the use of an anti-deficit lens and has stated, "One of the most effective ways to improve student engagement is to invite those who are the least engaged to share their knowledge and experiences" (p. 8). In taking an anti-deficit approach to data analysis, I focused on reviewing the data for those experiences that helped the first-year Muslim participants in my study feel a sense of belonging on campus. By utilizing an anti-deficit lens in my data analysis, I was more keenly aware of the opportunity to identify those things that supported my participants' success on campus.

*Research Design*

To address the primary and secondary research questions, I conducted a qualitative phenomenological case study. Creswell and Creswell (2018) describe the qualitative research approach as being one that sets out to explore the lived experiences of participants so that meaning of a phenomenon is understood. Qualitative research supports the ontological belief that reality is experienced in a multitude of ways (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As Merriam (1998) states "that reality is not an objective entity;

42

rather, there are multiple interpretations of reality" (p. 22), thus qualitative research seeks to understand the lived experiences of people. Qualitative studies are typically designed to address "how" questions, which makes utilizing this approach appropriate for this research study (Agee, 2008). A quantitative approach might address whether first-year Muslim students experience belonging levels consistent with or different from their non-Muslim peers; however, it does not allow for a deep and thorough understanding of how belonging is experienced. Since the focus of this study was to understand how first-year Muslim students experience the phenomenon of belonging, a qualitative approach was most effective.

The second characteristic of qualitative research is the role that the researcher plays in data collection and data analysis. In a previous section, I described my perspective, which is critical to understand as qualitative research relies on the researcher acting as the key instrument for data collection (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The qualitative design requires that the researcher commits to spending considerable time in the field to build rapport with participants and yield rich and descriptive data sets (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In the paragraphs that follow, I further define the approach used in this inquiry.

There are five approaches to qualitative research with each approach guiding specific methods of data collection and analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Since this study addressed how first-year Muslim students experience belonging on campus, a phenomenological study was most appropriate. Creswell and Poth (2018) define a phenomenological study as focused on describing the common meaning or lived experiences of a specific phenomenon in this instance; the phenomenon is "belonging." Further, I utilized a case study approach to this research by focusing on the lived

experiences of a select number of participants within an established set of boundaries. Merriam (1998) describes a case study as focused on a specific phenomenon to yield a rich and thick description as well as a clarifying understanding of the phenomenon in question. In this study, the phenomenon in question was defined as the belonging experiences of first-year Muslim students at a university in Philadelphia.

Given the impact of COVID-19 on higher education, a phenomenological case study made even greater sense. I say this because the experience of being a college student shifted dramatically with the onset of COVID-19 in March 2020 (DePietro, 2020). As stated in *Forbes*, "its effects on colleges and universities are multifaceted and quite complex. Whether it is in the area of applications and admissions, tuition, student loans, or teaching, COVID-19 is making a substantial, and perhaps, lasting impression on colleges and universities" (DePietro, 2020, para. 3). The use of a phenomenological case study allowed me to focus on a case—an individual within a real-life, context bounded by time and place (Stake, 2005; Yin, 2014). This study focused on the belonging experiences of a specific subpopulation of students during a specific point in time at a university in Philadelphia, PA.

As a researcher, I utilized a qualitative phenomenological case study to address the research question of how first-year Muslim undergraduate students experience belonging on campus. Not only did this research approach align with the primary research question, but also gave voice and insight into the lived experiences of an underrepresented and often misunderstood culture.

*Site Selection and Participant Sampling*

While I did not originally set out to study the phenomenon of belonging in the context of a global health pandemic, the reality of the situation and its influence on this study cannot be ignored. To me, it is reasonable to believe those COVID-19 interventions such as social distancing protocols, mask-wearing, and an emphasis on virtual learning and engagement will impact student belonging. In this section, the researcher overviews the site of data collection, participant sampling for the study, as well as special considerations made due to COVID-19.

*Site of Data Collection*

I live and work in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. As such, I wanted to understand the phenomenon of belonging among first-year Muslim students at the institution of my employment, Drexel University, a mid-sized, urban institution located in the western part of the city. Drexel University serves approximately 24,000 undergraduate and graduate students with 91% of students identifying as U.S. residents or domestic (Drexel University Institutional Research, 2020). Because this study focused on first-year students, it is important to note that eighty percent of undergraduate students are traditional-aged, 18–22 years old, and 99.9% receive some type of financial aid, with twenty-five percent receiving Pell grants (Drexel University Institutional Research, 2020).

The majority of first-year students are residential students due to the University's 2 Year Residency Requirement, a policy that necessitates first-year students living greater than 10 miles from campus live in one of the University's first-year residence halls or second-year affiliated housing properties. Historically, 89% of first-year students

live on campus in University residence halls. In addition, all residents are required to purchase a University meal plan.

Due to COVID-19 and resulting state and city ordinances, the University chose to deliver academic coursework through a hybrid of remote and face-to-face platforms for the fall quarter of 2020. The University implemented several measures to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, including the use of facemasks, limited in-person offerings, and other social distancing protocols. Notably, university housing was not open to first-year students during the period of data collection. As such, data collection relied heavily on several virtual platforms, including Zoom and email.

*Participants and Sampling*

The phenomenological research design calls for a sample size of three to ten participants (Dukes, 1984, as cited in Creswell & Poth, 2018); whereas a case study research design suggests limiting the sample to four or five cases (Yin, 2014, as cited in Creswell & Poth, 2018). As such, the target sample size for this study was three to five participants. A sample size of this range is consistent with general guidelines for qualitative research and allows for the collection of extensive detail about the individual studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I selected the participants in this study based on purposeful criterion and snowball sampling. Creswell and Poth (2018) state that purposeful sampling is to "intentionally sample a group of people that can best inform the researcher about the research problem under examination" (p. 148). The participants were college first-year students and rising sophomores or second-year students. All participants were traditional age, 18–22 years old. Participants had to self-identify as

being practicing or observant Muslims. Participants were both domestic and international students.

Throughout the fall quarter of 2020, I collected data. As such, the participants in this study are a blended sample of true first-year students and students that just started their second year at the University. Due to the timing of the data collection and because of the ongoing impacts of COVID-19 on higher education, I included second-year students in the sample. In the academic year, 2019–2020, the then first-year students experienced a hybrid academic year. Course instruction was conducted in the traditional face-to-face manner during the first half of their first year. The second half of their first academic year abruptly shifted to a virtual learning and social environment.

Undoubtedly, the shift from face-to-face to virtual delivery has had an impact on how the now second-year students experienced their first year on campus. The true first-year students in this study started their time with the University during the period of data collection, fall 2020. Given that these first-year participants were at the front end of their university experience, it was important to collect data contemporaneously from the rising sophomores who just finished their first-year experience with the University. Also, and as a result of COVID-19, many new protocols and procedures were implemented for the academic year 2020–2021. Many of these prescribed protocols focused on social distancing and virtual engagement, which likely influenced the belonging experiences of first-year students in new and unexpected ways. The use of a blended sample allowed me to account for experiences pre and post COVID-19.

After receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, I utilized my connections across Student Life to promote the research study to potential participants. I

leaned on several key forms of advertisement: DragonLink, an online student involvement portal; the listserv for the Student Center for Diversity and Inclusion; and a targeted notification to the Muslim Student Association (MSA) student leadership. I used snowball sampling to gain access to additional participants. Snowball sampling is beneficial in gaining access to a community and building trust with the participants (Olson, 1995). I called on the assistance of the University Imam, MSA faculty advisor, and other upperclassmen student leaders for referrals, as they have connections to students that met the qualifications of the study but would not have otherwise learned of it.

Interested students emailed me directly to participate in the study. By utilizing student summary information available to administrators on the campus, I confirmed the student's class standing, number of completed credits, and international or domestic status. I tracked the names of interested students in a spreadsheet along with the demographic information described above. Based on the demographic information available, I selected five participants for the study. Listed in Table 1 are a summary of the participants (see Table 1) and their demographic information.

Table 1

*Demographic Information of Study Participants*

| Participant Pseudonym | Sex | Class Year | International or Domestic Student |
|---|---|---|---|
| Asim | Male | First Year | Domestic |
| Saad | Male | Second Year | Domestic |
| Kiran | Female | First Year | International |
| Salim | Female | Second Year | Domestic |
| Naeem | Male | Second Year | International |

After selecting the participants, I emailed an overview of the study and its protocol to the selected students and asked them to review a consent form (see Appendix A). Next, I asked the participants to rank order their preference for an interview date and time based on a predetermined set of dates. In the next section, I overview the procedures utilized for collecting data.

<div align="center">*Data Collection Procedures*</div>

Consistent with Yin's (2014) belief that data should be collected through multiple sources, this study utilized semi-structured interviews with five first-year Muslim undergraduate students, as well a photo-elicitation and reflection exercise to understand their belonging experiences. As the researcher, I wanted to provide opportunities for participants to share their experiences of belonging through multiple means of expression so that the phenomenon of "belonging" is thoroughly described and understood. Throughout the following section, I outline how I utilized interviews, reflections, and photos to collect the data for this study. Table 2 overviews the primary and secondary research questions and the means for data collection associated with each question (see Table 2).

*Semi-structured Interviews*

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), in-depth interviews play a central role in data collection for phenomenological studies, as they allow the researcher to focus on describing the meaning of the phenomenon through the lens of those that have experienced it. Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) state that "knowledge is constructed in the interaction between the interviewer and interviewee" (p. 4) and "attempts to understand the world from the subjects' point of view, to unfold the meaning of their experience, to

uncover their lived world" (p. 3). As such, this study employed semi-structured interviews as a primary form of data collection. Several authors have discussed protocols for qualitative research interviewing. The following table (see Table 3) overviews the steps taken in this research study as it relates to semi-structured interviewing and presented by Creswell and Poth (2018).

Table 2

*Summary of the Data Collection Methods for Each of the Main Research Questions*

| Research Question | Data Collection |
|---|---|
| How do first-year Muslim undergraduate students at an urban university in the northeastern United States describe their sense of belonging on campus? | Semi-structured Interviews<br><br>Photo elicitation and reflection |
| What is it like to be a first-year Muslim student on campus? | Semi-structured Interviews<br>Photo elicitation and reflection |
| What are the key components/experiences contributing to first-year Muslim students' sense of belonging? | Semi-structured Interviews |
| What conditions/experiences contribute to first-year Muslim students feeling unconnected or unwelcome as if they don't belong? | Semi-structured Interviews |
| How do first-year Muslim students describe their sense of belonging inside the classroom? | Semi-structured Interviews |
| How do first-year Muslim students describe their sense of belonging outside of the classroom? | Semi-structured Interviews |

The interview protocol (see Appendix B) provided the researcher with predetermined questions by theme but allowed for flexibility in the wording of the

questions as guided by the moment (Patton, 1987). Though this method may

unintentionally cause the researcher to miss an important topic, the strength of the

interview lies in the ability of the researcher to have a more authentic conversation with

the participant (Patton, 1987).

Table 3

*Procedures for Data Collection (Creswell & Poth, 2018)*

| Procedures for Conducting Interviews | Specific Steps Taken by the Researcher |
| --- | --- |
| Develop and determine research questions | A full overview of the primary and secondary research questions can be found in Table 2. |
| Identify and select participants | Criterion and snowball sampling as described in the sampling section |
| Determine interview type | Semi-structured interviews conducted over 45-60 minutes; with the opportunity to request a second interview |
| Collect and record data | Zoom was utilized to record the interview as it allowed for social distancing measures as required by COVID-19; Data was uploaded and stored in DeDoose |
| Develop and utilize an interview protocol | The interview followed the protocol as described in Appendix B |
| Identify interview location | Participants were provided with instructions in advance for how to create a noise and distraction-free environment over Zoom |
| Utilize consent form | A copy of the consent form utilized in this study may be found in Appendix A |

Each semi-structured interview lasted 45 minutes. Due to in-person meeting

restrictions, I utilized the Zoom platform to conduct and record each interview. During

each interview, I utilized the process of memoing to capture descriptive and reflective notes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I uploaded a copy of the recording as well as the interview transcription and my researcher notes to DeDoose for future analysis. Upon conclusion of the interview, I provided participants with information and directions regarding the next phase of the study—a photo-elicitation and reflection exercise (see Appendix D). I also told participants of the potential need for a follow-up interview.

*Photo Elicitation and Reflection*

Photo-elicitation, also known as photo feedback and photo-interviewing, is a form of qualitative research that involves the researcher asking the participant to provide or discuss photos that are relevant to their lives, their realities, and the phenomenon being studied (Kronk et al., 2015). Photo-elicitation can mitigate some of the challenges associated with traditional interviewing techniques as it allows for a shared understanding of a phenomenon, "because it is anchored in an image that is understood, at least in part, by both parties" (Harper, 2002, p. 20). The technique may be useful for participants that are not as articulate or struggle to verbalize their experiences. Further, photo-elicitation allows for the generation of feelings and meaning around the visual prompt, which might be overlooked through verbal inquiry alone (Kronk et al., 2015).

For this study, I utilized photo-elicitation and a reflection exercise so that I could more deeply understand the belonging experiences of first-year Muslim students. As part of the research process, I asked participants to share up to three photos or visuals that represented their experience as a first-year Muslim student at the University. I directed participants to email their photos directly to me along with a written response to several corresponding reflection questions. The following figure (see Figure 2) overviews the

reflection prompts that I asked students to respond to and submit alongside their photos or visuals.

> Reflect on your experience as a Muslim student on this campus. How do your photos or visuals align with that experience?

> Strayhorn (2012) describes belonging in college as follows: "it refers to students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group or others on campus" (p. 55). In what ways have you experienced belonging as a Muslim on campus? How do your photos connect to the definition provided by Strayhorn (2012)?

> Describe the moment when you felt the greatest sense of belonging on campus.

*Figure 2*. Reflection prompts for photo elicitation exercise.

A deadline of two weeks from the conclusion of his or her interview was given to each participant to submit this information for consideration in the study.

Upon receipt of each participant's completed reflections and photos, I uploaded the data to DeDoose for storage and future analysis. I saved each participant's photos and reflections in the file with that participant's assigned pseudonym label. I then reviewed each participant's reflection statements and photo submissions. Memoing was conducted to capture initial impressions, thoughts, and connections as I reviewed the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Once the participant had completed an interview and submitted their photos and reflection statement, I sent them a thank you message via email. The thank you message

included a timeline for the remainder of the research study, information about how the results would be communicated, and a link for a gift card to Amazon.

*Data Analysis Procedures*

An a priori theoretical framework influenced by the works of Maslow (1954), Goodenow (1993), and Strayhorn (2012) guided the data analysis in this study. Creswell and Poth (2018) describe data analysis not as a step-by-step linear process, but as a spiral. The idea of the spiral being that as the researcher moves along in the analysis, the data becomes more focused and clearer. The data analysis spiral presented by Creswell and Poth (2018) provided a roadmap for the procedures used in this study's analysis. Figure 3 (see Figure 3) represents my interpretation of the data analysis spiral as described by Creswell and Poth (2018).



Organization of the Data
Reading the Data and Memoing

Open-coding of the Data
Axial-coding of the Data
Within-case Analysis
Across-case Analysis

Emergent Themes
Representation
of the
Data
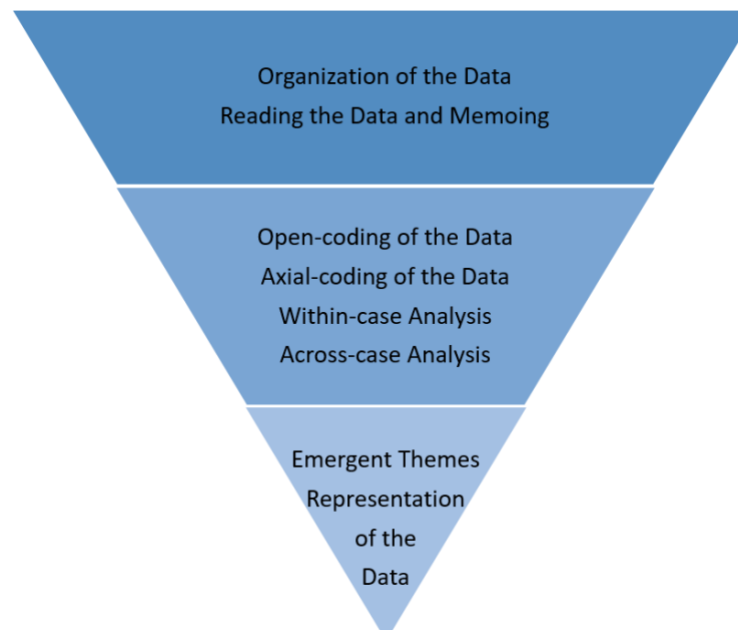
*Figure 3*. Data analysis procedures as based upon the work of Creswell and Poth (2018, p. 186).

The following sections overview the data analysis procedures and validation strategies employed in this study.

*Procedures*

Creswell and Poth (2018) describe data analysis in qualitative research to include three key components: preparing and organizing data, reducing data into themes, and finally presenting the data through discussion and visuals. First, I started by implementing a data management and organization strategy. I transferred the data collected through interviews, reflection statements, and photo-elicitation into digital files. As previously noted, I assigned all participants a pseudonym immediately following the completion of their interview to mitigate the inclusion of identifiable information into the data analysis process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I named each digital file so that it reflected the pseudonym assigned to each participant. I maintained a separate spreadsheet that included each participant's name, assigned pseudonym, and type of data collected with the date of the collection so that files could be easily located. I stored the data using DeDoose software to ensure the security of the information collected.

Secondly, once I organized the data, I utilized the concept of memoing. Memoing involves the writing of notes or memos in the margins of transcripts or while reading and reviewing the data. This approach allows the researcher to get a sense of the data as a whole and to start building a "storyline" or "meta-narrative" (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Stuckey, 2015). Memoing allowed me to track my thoughts and perceptions at each stage of the data analysis process so that they were not lost. I utilized a system in which I compiled all the notes generated from a memoing session into a single document that corresponded to a single piece of data. Specifically, I would spend an hour after the

interview to compile notes and save them as a document alongside the interview

transcript for each participant. I employed the same process when reviewing the

reflection statements and photos. I also stored all memoing documents in DeDoose.

*Analysis*

Once I digitalized and reviewed the data using memoing, I began the process of

coding the data. I initiated this process by utilizing a strategy recommended by

qualitative researcher Stuckey (2015). I reviewed each piece of data and asked, "what is

the data telling me that will help me understand how first-year Muslim students

experience belonging?" Using this question as a jumping-off point, I was able to organize

and code my data in alignment with the purpose of the research study (Stucky, 2015).

Rossman and Rallis (2012, as cited in Creswell & Creswell, 2018) describe coding as a

common form of analysis in qualitative research that involves bracketing the data into

chunks and assigning a label to those categories. In my initial phase of coding, I specified

a list of predetermined codes based on the theoretical framework of Maslow (1954),

Goodenow (1993), and Strayhorn (2012). The use of predetermined codes allowed me to

identify how the data aligned with the theoretical framework guiding my study (Bergin,

2018). Additionally, this initial round of open coding allowed me to recognize potential

new themes for future rounds of analysis (Bergin, 2018). The table (see Table 4)

represents the predetermined list of codes utilized during the open coding phase of my

data analysis. As I reviewed each piece of data using open coding, I also took notes to

summarize how each participant's interview, photo, and reflection statement connected to

the theoretical framework guiding the study. I uploaded and filed these notes in DeDoose

and referred back to them throughout the data analysis process. After the initial round of

open coding, I then created a codebook or document that defined each code and how I evaluated the data against it (Bergin, 2018).

Table 4

*Predetermined Codes Utilized for Open Coding Phase of Framework Analysis*

| Connection to Theoretical Framework | Open Code Utilized |
| --- | --- |
| Maslow (1954) | Belonging |
| Goodenow (1993) | Academic belonging experiences |
| Goodenow (1993) | Social or out of classroom belonging experiences |
| Strayhorn (2012) | Fit and membership |
| Strayhorn (2012) | Feelings of being valued |

A codebook is useful in helping the researcher to "specify the boundaries of the code … helps the researcher recall the precise meaning of each code…and instills greater consistency in the analysis process" (Bergin, 2018, p. 159).

After I completed the open coding process, I moved through the next phase of coding known as axial coding. Axial coding is a process that allows the researcher to begin defining larger categories of codes based on the connections between codes used in the open coding process (Bergin, 2018). Using the coding process, I analyzed each case, a within-case analysis, according to the theoretical framework guiding this study. This allowed me to advance a detailed description of each participant's experience with belonging.

After reviewing the data again, I was able to cluster codes and significant statements into categories based on similarities and then begin to identify major themes (Moustakas, 1994, as cited in Creswell & Poth, 2018). The themes generated from this

process provided the framework for my thematic analysis. Utilizing the themes as identified in Table 5, I moved from within-case analysis to an across-case analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The themes identified for this analysis served as the key findings for the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Results are discussed in detail during Chapter Four.

*Validation Strategies*

Qualitative research measures are typically discussed using the terminology suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. This section overviews the steps that the researcher utilized to meet the constructs set forth by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Creditability focuses on whether the information collected is believable from the perspective of the participants. In other words, credibility answers the question of whether the study confidently reflects the truth according to those that have experienced the phenomenon (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To strengthen credibility in this qualitative study, I conducted member checking, a process that involves engaging with the participants during the interview process or at the end of the study to ensure the accuracy of the data recorded (Moustakas, 1994).

Dependability is the accurate and detailed documentation of the steps taken to conduct the study for replication (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Throughout chapter three, I overviewed the steps for data collection and data analysis including IRB permissions, ethical safeguards for participants, interview protocols, and a step-by-step implementation guide for data analysis. Transferability is the ability to transfer or apply the findings of the study to the wider population. Because the sample size is smaller in a phenomenological research design, transferability becomes even more important. Lincoln

and Guba (1985) suggest that the researcher provide a rich description of the fieldwork

site, including contextual information and assumptions so that readers can make

inferences regarding transferability. I provide insight into the fieldwork site earlier in this

chapter and again by presenting detailed accounts and quotations from the participants in

chapter four (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Confirmability focuses on reviewing the data collection and data analysis

procedures for bias. Many qualitative researchers utilize the section on the researcher's

perspective to document lived experiences and biases that the researcher brings to the

study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I provide a thorough overview of my perspective earlier

in this chapter. In addition to engaging in reflexivity, I was sure to report data points that

fell outside of the pattern of a code or theme (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Finally, I utilized

several means of data collection as a means of triangulation. Triangulation involves the

use of multiple data sources to establish corroboration and validity (Creswell & Poth,

2018).

*Ethical Considerations*

According to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Baylor University, this

study does not qualify as human subjects research. This determination was due to the

results of the study not being generalizable to the broader population due to only having a

sample size of three to five participants. A copy of the IRB approval is in Appendix C.

Though this study does not fall within the regulations for human subjects research, it was

still conducted ethically. The data collected through this study was from consenting adult

undergraduate students. Before the interview, I sent a consent form to the participants via

email and then reviewed it with them onsite the day of the interview. A copy of the consent form utilized before data collection is available in Appendix A.

I informed each student participant of the purpose and nature of the study and provided information related to ethical safeguards including data protection, privacy, and the opportunity to withdraw from the process at any point without penalty or harm. To protect the identities of the student participants, I assigned a pseudonym to each person. Additionally, given my employee status at the site of the study, the consent form included a notation that participation in the study does not obligate the university to implement participant recommendations. I provided each participant with a copy of the findings. As a means of reciprocity, I gave each participant a gift card to Amazon.

Given that the study focuses on the experiences of Muslim identifying people, I connected with the University Imam in advance of the study to determine if any religious considerations needed to be included in the data collection protocol. The Imam's guidance helped to mitigate any potential conflicts participants may have with the data collection procedures. Further, I utilized an interview protocol to distance myself from the data collection process and limit any personal reactions to what the participants shared.

*Limitations and Delimitations*

Several limitations affect this study. First, the participants in the study attended a university located in an urban area in the Northeast. The Pew Research Center (2018) indicates that there is a higher percentage of Muslims in the urban and metropolitan areas of the United States, which may have influenced the overall experiences of these participants. Given my sampling methods and recruitment strategy, it is likely that the

participants are limited to those students that learned of the study through DragonLink and the Muslim Student Association (MSA). As such, the sample only reflects first-year students that are plugged into the MSA community.

Second, and likely to be most impactful, is the influence of COVID-19, a global pandemic, that has required the use of social distancing measures and an emphasis on virtual learning and engagement. Most colleges and universities in the United States experienced some level of disruption to their face-to-face operations in March 2019 (DePietro, 2020). The quick shift from a traditional face-to-face campus to a virtual campus environment undoubtedly affected the experiences of students socially. Restrictions on gathering sizes and the use of other mitigating techniques such as distance requirements and use of face masks will augment the student experience both in and outside of the classroom and in turn, may impact how students experience belonging.

Building upon the limitation that COVID-19 brings to this study is the simple fact that the data collected during this study is from a specific point in time on one campus in the United States. While I am hopeful that other practitioners may learn from this study, the findings from the study may not be generalizable to the broader population of Muslim students in college.

Finally, my identity may have influenced how willing participants were to share during the interview process. I took appropriate steps to build rapport with the participants during the process; however, the participants may have been more comfortable with a researcher that identifies as Muslim and non-White.

*Conclusion*

Throughout this chapter, I provided an overview of the methodology utilized for this research study. I utilized a qualitative approach to answer the primary research question of how first-year Muslim students experience belonging on campus. The research design, site selection, participants, data collection, and analysis procedures align with a qualitative approach. In Chapter Four, I provide insight into the findings of the study as well as implications for higher education.

CHAPTER FOUR

Results and Implications

*Introduction*

The overarching purpose of this study to understand and describe the lived experiences of first-year Muslim students by answering the central research question: How do first-year Muslim undergraduate students at an urban university in the northeastern United States describe their sense of belonging on campus? In order to answer the research questions, semi-structured interviews and a photo-elicitation and reflection exercise provided data for review through a theoretical framework guided by Maslow (1954), Goodenow (1993), and Strayhorn (2012). I strived to reveal ways in which the in-classroom and out-of-classroom environment shape the lived belonging experiences of first-year Muslim students.

Throughout this chapter, I overview the central findings of this qualitative study. I start by first presenting each individual case. Through the presentation of each case, I provide insights into the lived experiences of first-year Muslim students in and out of the classroom setting. The in-case analysis focuses on applying the theoretical framework guided by Maslow (1954), Goodenow (1993), and Strayhorn (2012) to the following sub-central research questions:

1. How do first-year Muslim students describe their feelings of belonging in the classroom?

2. How do first-year Muslim students describe their sense of belonging outside of the classroom?

After overviewing each case, I identify the emergent themes across the cases that answer the central and sub-central research questions guiding this study. Presenting the study findings in this manner allows for a truer understanding of the phenomenon that is the belonging experiences of first-year Muslim students on a college campus in the northeastern United States. Finally, I discuss the practical implications for higher education by offering specific recommendations for faculty members, student affairs professionals, and student leaders. Adoption of these recommendations by practitioners will contribute to a more inclusive and welcoming environment for first-year Muslim students on a college campus.

*Individual Case Descriptions and Analysis*

This section overviews each of the multiple cases making up this study. The cases in this study are bound by time and location and represent the individual belonging experiences of several Muslim first-year students (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Specifically, each case considered the belonging experiences of a Muslim first-year student who started at the University between the fall of 2019 and the fall of 2020. Participants completed individual interviews and a photo-elicitation and reflection exercise during November 2020. Each of the participants was an undergraduate student in the first or second year of their studies at the University. The participants identified as traditional-aged undergraduate students between 18–22 years old and all have a connection to the Muslim Student Association (MSA) at the University. The gender of the participants included two women and three men. Four of the five participants were first-generation U.S. citizens. One participant was living internationally at the time of the interview. The other four participants were residing in the United States at the time of data collection.

Due to COVID-19 and the University's remote learning status, all participants were residing at home with their families versus living in on-campus or close to campus housing.

I analyzed each case using a theoretical framework guided by Maslow (1954), Goodenow (1993), and Strayhorn (2012). As a part of the in-case analysis, each participant spoke about instances—both in and out of the classroom—when they felt that their presence and participation mattered (Goodenow, 1993; Strayhorn, 2012). In the case descriptions that follow, I discuss the most salient pieces of each participants' belonging experiences and their connection to the theoretical framework and the literature.

*Asim: Belonging through Brotherhood*

Asim is a first-year student studying chemistry. He was born in Pakistan and immigrated to the United States as a child. Asim's parents were supportive of him attending college; however, insisted that he study in a location that allowed him to commute to campus. He chose to attend Drexel University because of its proximity to his home, his observations of diversity on campus, and the university's alignment with his career aspirations in the medical field.

When asked about his experiences in the classroom, Asim shared that his greatest adjustment has been getting used to the workload and pace. While he finds his faculty members to be approachable, he perceived that faculty from more technical subjects were less personable. Since starting his studies at the University, Asim has only been able to take classes remotely, never in a face-to-face format. Despite never meeting his classmates in person, Asim shared that he has been able to make connections and "interact socially through the use of GroupMe, Zoom meetings, and peer virtual meetings

65

for study and exam prep." He further explained that he felt the greatest sense of belonging with other chemistry majors and specifically during the period leading up to exams. Goodenow (1993) states, "Almost all people find school (or other work settings) more enjoyable, worthwhile, and interesting when they believe that others in the environment like and value them" (p. 68). Despite the challenges with pace and workload, Asim is likely to stay academically motivated due to the connections he has made with the other students in his major (Goodenow, 1993).

Strayhorn's (2012) emphasis on "membership and fit" and "feelings of being valued" were reflected in Asim's description of his experiences outside of the classroom. Asim joined a fraternity during the fall quarter of 2020, his first term at the university. This portion of the interview is where I saw Asim come to life—he shared about his fraternity with enthusiasm and pride. He described his fraternity brothers as being "very good at mentoring and creating a place where I can just take like a load off and talk to them about anything." Asim's description of his fraternity brothers is an indication that he has begun to develop meaningful friendships with other students on campus. His emphasis on the mentorship and acceptance he receives from his fraternity brothers is a strong example of the role belonging can play in enhancing a student's connection and commitment to the institution (Strayhorn, 2012).

*Saad: Finding a Place of Sanctuary*

Saad started at the University in Fall 2019 and is studying biological sciences. He was born and raised in New Jersey and became introduced to Drexel during the college search process. Saad desires to be a physician and chose to attend Drexel because of the BS/MD program, a program that admits students to their undergraduate program and

medical school at once. When asked about his experience transitioning to college, Saad

openly discussed the challenges he faced both academically and mentally in his transition

from high school. He talked about how he was a high-achieving student in high school

and struggled to keep up academically during his first quarter. Saad described there being

points of his first few months on campus where he struggled to stay focused and

motivated. He described a particularly challenging day as follows:

> And so one of the most difficult like parts for me was having to deal with not
> doing well and then not feeling like doing anything either because I wasn't doing
> well. So, it was a really vicious cycle for me … and then I can very distinctly
> remember I failed a chemistry exam. One day I got like a 60. God. I'm coming
> home from the chemistry exam and I had a rough day in general and I'm like, you
> know, I don't want to go home right now and study more. So I just went to the
> MSA prayer hall and I prayed. And I felt better. And I just sat down with some of
> my friends that were also in the prayer hall and we just talked for a bit. Then I
> remember thinking, wow, I really feel so happy that I did come to Drexel because
> we do have this facility and I did meet these great people at this facility and I felt
> a lot better that day because of that.

Saad went on to share that he spends multiple hours each day at the Intercultural Center,

the building where the Muslim prayer hall or prayer room is located. He described the

time he spends there as "almost an issue" because he frequents the space so often. He was

a commuter student during his first year on campus and found the Intercultural Center to

be a place where you can meet and sit with all types of students.

Within the classroom setting, Saad described his relationships with faculty to be

non-existent, as he considers himself to be a "get in and get out" type of student. Initially,

Saad's admission about his lack of relationships with faculty concerned me because

Goodenow (1993) emphasizes that students must believe that others, particularly

teachers, are invested in their academic success and are personally rooting for them. Saad

went on to share that he prefers to spend time building relationships with his MSA

colleagues or other students met at the gym and volleyball courts. Saad believed he has strong connections with the other biology majors and does not feel unwelcome in the classroom. He identified two other Muslim students in his BS/MD program and demonstrated an appreciation for their presence in the program. Largely, Saad's belonging experiences center on his time spent with the Muslim Student Association (MSA) and at the Intercultural Center.

*Kiran: Cautiously Sharing Identity*

Kiran is a first-year student studying political science. Kiran was completing her studies from her home in Jordan at the time of data collection. Due to COVID-19 travel restrictions, Kiran had not yet been to campus. Kiran's parents both studied in the United States before returning to Jordan. While they were supportive of Kiran's decision to come to the United States for college, her parents were nervous about her moving to a city. Kiran's parents both studied in the United States and have had successful careers. As such, Kiran views a U.S. education as important and necessary for her future professional success. Because Kiran was not physically on campus for the start of her first year at the University, the entirety of her college experience (at the time of the interview) had taken place through virtual or digital formats. Because of the unique circumstances surrounding her start to college life, most of our conversation focused on Kiran's experiences in the academic environment.

In my interview with Kiran, she repeatedly expressed a desire to be fully accepted at the University. She stated, "I was looking for an institution where I could kind of be myself like unapologetically." When asked how she would rate her feelings of belonging on a scale of one through ten, Kiran rated herself at a five. She shared that she expected

the transition from high school to college to be difficult but has found the virtual learning environment to exacerbate these challenges. Specifically, Kiran talked about the difficulties in building personal connections with other students. It was during this part of the interview that Kiran started to discuss the interplay of her identity and relationship building in the classroom environment. She shared,

> Every single connection that I have with my classmates, which I do have a lot of connections, it's required me to be the person to reach out first. And I'm not sure if that's because I'm other kids kind of, I don't know, but I feel like every single connection I've had to be the person that reaches out first and then things progress normally. I do feel like there's a little bit of like a unspoken confusion. Where kids would say things like, oh, I'm sure, living in Jordan is very different, or just random remarks like that. I choose not to pick them, but I feel like there is a little bit of like that blur and I question whether being in-person (instead of virtual learning) kind of would eliminate some of those concerns with people, yeah.

Strayhorn (2012) argues that belonging needs fluctuate with environment and situation but are particularly important in unfamiliar, challenging, or transitional contexts. Kiran shared there are no other Muslim or Arab students in her classes and while she has come to accept this, she stated, "It would be nice." She shared that her desire to have other Muslim students in the classroom might be stronger if she was more "visibly Muslim." Kiran does not wear a hijab and wonders if this fact has been helpful in her ability to fit in more easily with others. On the other hand, Kiran's status as a less visible Muslim may lead to added stress as she navigates whether, when, and how to reveal her identity (Bowman & Smedley, 2013).

Kiran described the curriculum in her political sciences courses as being U.S.-centric. She shared that as an international student, specifically one with a Palestinian background, she has had a hard time finding her voice. She stated, "I'm familiar with the U.S. and everything, but it there's always these, you know, urges to kind of explain things

from my side and my perspective." Kiran shared that she does not always feel heard in the classroom and that it takes a bit longer for faculty and classmates to understand her perspective. Goodenow (1993) defines student belonging in the classroom as feelings of acceptance by both teachers and peers, as well as feeling as if their contributions are important. Kiran is not always able to share parts of her background and perceives that others make assumptions about her based on her Palestinian and Jordanian identity. Kiran described, "At certain times when I kind of tried to insert a little bit of that aspect of my identity in like class discussions, I kind of tried to look away from the response or look away from how people would react." Strayhorn (2012) emphasizes that feelings of belonging are critical to student success in the classroom. Similarly, Goodenow (1993) argues students may have difficulty maintaining academic commitment and engagement when they do not feel personally valued in the classroom. Kiran's experience in the classroom is concerning given the significant role that belonging has on academic achievement and motivation.

Despite facing challenges in the classroom, Kiran was able to identify several moments of connection and belonging. In one example, Kiran described a session that she attended with the Civic Engagement Center on campus. She described the session as being conversation-based and a moment of belonging. She shared that she was comfortable with the topic and "I felt like it was the proper time for me to introduce myself and talk about what makes me feel. That was really one of the first times that I felt like I had that space." Kiran's experience with the Civic Engagement Center directly aligns with Strayhorn's (2012) assertion that belonging is directly related to a student's ability to remain connected to their cultural heritage while transitioning to college. Kiran

also talked a lot about her interactions with the Muslim Student Association and other student organizations on campus and how she was looking forward to being on campus and "being a more productive member" of the student organizations. Kiran's desire to increase her involvement with MSA aligns with Strayhorn's (2012) conclusions that students develop a sense that they matter, and others depend on them through involvement with student organizations.

*Salim: Fit through Diversity*

Salim began her studies at the University in Fall 2019 and is studying sociology. She is the third of five children and was born in Philadelphia to immigrant parents. Salim described herself as being very close with her siblings. She has two siblings that are also attending colleges in Philadelphia. Finances and location were the leading factors in her decision-making for college. During the interview, Salim described her experience being accepted to Drexel as a Liberty Scholar, meaning that she was awarded a scholarship by the University to cover her tuition, room, and board throughout her undergraduate career. She was incredibly proud to be a recipient of the Liberty Scholarship and how happy this accomplishment made her parents. When asked to rate her level of belonging on a scale of one through ten, Salim described herself as a ten.

Salim is visibly Muslim—she wears a hijab. She described the discomfort she feels as "the only girl with a headscarf" and that she is "not used to explaining" her veil to other students. The term, "headscarf," was used by Salim eleven times during our interview. In one portion of our conversation, Salim shared that she did not think that being Muslim would make a difference as to how people view her but then went on to describe her experiences related to wearing a hijab on campus as follows:

I do think sometimes in some cases if I was the only girl wearing a headscarf um it was just new to people. And that's not a problem like I have no problem educating people. Like they're curious. If they have questions, you know, I'm open to when students ask. I'll answer. I'm like, you know, NO OFFENSE TAKEN. I like that people are curious and want to know because I'd rather that than assume things about me. Because I do feel like in some instances, people would focus, maybe more on the fact that I'm wearing a headscarf because it's so new to them. Maybe they grew up in an area where that wasn't something they were used to seeing. Um, so I just, yeah, I would probably just say that because that's also something that I wasn't used to explaining to people. Like at the high school, I went to, like, you know, was very diverse in religion and ethnicity. So it was like people, people who weren't Muslim would know about the religion of Islam and stuff like that.

Salim described the feeling as though her classmates focused on her headscarf versus speaking directly with her in conversations. One component of Goodenow's (1993) scale of belongingness looked at feelings of "being liked for who I am." Salim's lived experience exemplifies how visibly Muslim women may feel less comfortable on campuses where there is a small number of other veiled Muslim women. A 2020 study by Pouraskari focused on the experiences of Hijabi Muslim women and found a negative correlation between wearing a hijab and a sense of belonging, specifically in the areas of faculty support, peer support, and class comfort. Pouraskari (2020) writes,

> Hijabi Muslim women felt uncomfortable being stared at and expressed they felt they are treated as an "other," and not fitting in the standard of America-looking. These women reported feelings of sadness, frustration, anger, and belittlement. These findings are similar to those reported by Read and Bartkowski (2000), who found that hijabi Muslim women reported they feel "weird" and not understood by others because of wearing the hijab. (p.37)

Pouraskari's (2020) findings are reflected in Salim's experience as a visibly Muslim student on campus.

At a later point in the interview, Salim talked about her classroom experiences. She shared that she was often the only Muslim student in her science labs. The labs had a smaller number of students and she was very aware of her identity as a Muslim in that

setting. She shared, "I was the only one wearing a headscarf, and … I felt like I was looked at sometimes differently because I was wearing a headscarf." In comparison, Salim shared that she felt more comfortable in a lecture setting because there was a more obvious and greater diversity of students. Salim's discomfort in the lab and classroom settings are concerning because Goodenow's (1993) definition of belonging places emphasis on the need to feel accepted by peers and teachers.

Outside of the classroom, Salim described her experience living in the residence hall. Despite having her room covered through scholarship, Salim rarely, if ever, slept in her residence hall room. Because the building had both men and women on the same floor, it was difficult for her to use the restroom and showers. She described needing to put a headscarf on to use the bathroom because she was concerned about interacting with a male student in the hallway. There are also no restrictions on men being in women's rooms and vice versa in the residence halls which required Salim to stay covered in her room. In this example, Salim shares that she felt so uncomfortable staying in her residence hall that her family would often pick her up at night and bring her back to campus in the morning. Strayhorn (2012) links belonging to students' perception that their identities and values are a part of the campus community. This example highlights how Salim's Muslim identity and values are not congruent with the on-campus living experience.

Despite having endured multiple experiences of discomfort and misfit, Salim described herself as being a ten out of ten in terms of her feelings of belonging on campus. A self-described social butterfly, Salim shared how much she enjoys getting to know other people on campus and that the more people she meets, the more comfortable

she feels. Salim cited several specific experiences and physical places on campus as contributing to her feelings of belonging. She states, "Drexel's campus is very diverse, and I feel as though having inclusive, diverse areas are what contribute to my experience of belonging." For Salim, the Intercultural Center (see Figure 4) was the place she felt most comfortable on campus.



*Figure 4.* A photo of the Intercultural Center submitted by participant, Salim.

Salim shared that not only was the Intercultural Center the common space for the MSA but a place where she could regularly interact with non-Muslims. Interactions with diverse peers help to support college students' feelings of belonging according to Strayhorn (2012).

*Naeem: Balancing Home Culture with Campus Culture*

Naeem is a second-year student. He was born in Pakistan and immigrated to the U.S. as a child. He lives in Princeton, New Jersey, a short train ride away from campus. His parents were supportive of his desire to attend college though Naeem said it took time to convince them to support his desire to study graphic design instead of medicine. Naeem was drawn to the University because of its proximity to his home as well as the

faculty in the graphic design program. He admired that many of the faculty own

businesses and use their real-life experiences within the industry to exemplify the skills

required in graphic design. Naeem is visibly Muslim and wears a turban, a traditional

Muslim head covering.

Naeem described challenges in making new friends and adjusting to the academic

environment during his first year on campus. Specifically, Naeem found it difficult to

practice his culture during his first few months on campus. He shared,

> Like there's, you know, a specific culture that I grew up around and am always
> used to. And I'm like, I didn't think I'd have to make too much effort of finding
> my own lifestyle. It was just kind of like set for me by my parents and my
> siblings. But when I came when it comes to living on my own. I kind of had to
> find a new lifestyle myself. At home, we are very cultural. So we always sit and
> eat dinner at the table. And now, like in living by myself in the city I always find
> myself eating alone. And I feel like that's just the norm with college, but it was
> just, it was very bothering for me. So I would always ask my roommate to have
> dinner with me.

Naeem's experience is not unique and aligns with Tachine et al.'s (2017) position that

students' sense of belonging must go beyond a simple integration into the system of an

institution. There must also be cultural validation or a means for the student to experience

cultural validation on campus. Further, Naeem's experience, like Salim's, upholds

Strayhorn's (2012) assertion that students belonging experiences are increased when they

view their identity and values integrated into the campus community.

Naeem talked a lot about how nervous and anxious he was around other students

and in social situations. As a result, Naeem poured himself into his academics and spent

most of his time working on graphic design assignments and projects. Goodenow (1993)

emphasizes that students must feel valued and welcomed to sustain their academic

commitment. Interestingly it appears that Naeem used academics as an escape from the

challenges he had making connections with other students. Numerous studies point to the connection between belonging on long-term academic success (Goodenow, 1993; Strayhorn, 2012). Thankfully, Naeem eventually found belonging on campus. The winter 2020 quarter was an important transition point for Naeem. He started to attend events with the students in the Muslim Student Association (MSA) outside of just Friday prayers. Naeem mentioned the MSA twenty-one times throughout his interview and described the MSA as a way to "help me practice my religion and culture." The MSA is where Naeem began to feel more comfortable "speaking up" and sharing his ideas and opinions. The MSA helped Naeem to find peers with shared interests and to form deeper connections through group membership (Strayhorn, 2012; Vincent, 2016).

*Summary of In-Case Analysis*

Each case presented as part of this study underscores the works of Maslow (1954), Goodenow (1993), and Strayhorn (2012). Additionally, the in-case analysis provided insight into lived experiences of first-year Muslim students on this campus. Through the analysis of each case, I answered the following sub-research questions:

1. How do first-year Muslim students describe their feelings of belonging in the classroom?

2. How do first-year Muslim students describe their sense of belonging outside of the classroom?

Consistent with the theoretical framework, participants described their experiences of "membership and fit" both in and out of the classroom (Goodenow, 1993; Maslow, 1954; Strayhorn, 2012). Collectively, the participants shared personal moments of belonging but juxtaposed those moments with feelings of disconnection from the campus community. The participants each reinforced Goodenow's (1993) notion that students

need to feel "accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others (teachers and peers)" (p. 25).

In addition to supporting the theoretical framework guiding this study (see Table 5), the cases further underscore extant literature and research focused on the experiences of Muslim students on college campuses (Asmar et al., 2004; Cole & Ahmadi, 2010; Dimandja, 2017; Rangoonwala et al., 2011; Seggie & Sanford, 2010; Swisher, 2019).

Table 5

*Cases as Aligned with the Theoretical Framework*

| Participant | Membership and Fit in the Classroom | Feelings of Being Personally Valued | Membership and Fit Outside of the Classroom | Basic Need |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Asim | | X | X | |
| Saad | X | | X | X |
| Kiran | X | X | | X |
| Salim | X | X | X | X |
| Naeem | X | X | X | X |

Upon conclusion of the in-case analysis, I conducted an across-case analysis. The following section provides insight into the themes that emerged as central to the belonging experiences of the participants.

*Thematic Analysis and Emergent Themes*

Utilizing in-case analysis, I reviewed the data through the theoretical framework of Maslow (1954), Goodenow (1993), and Strayhorn (2012). The framework allowed me to categorize the data based on whether the students were describing belonging experiences in the classroom or out-of-the-classroom. After completing the in-case

analysis, I conducted an across-case analysis, a thematic analysis stage, and identified themes that answered the central and sub-central research questions. Specifically, the across-case analysis yielded themes that address the following sub-central questions:

1.      What are the key components/experiences contributing to first-year Muslim students' sense of belonging?

2.      What conditions/experiences contribute to first-year Muslim students feeling unconnected or unwelcome as if they do not belong?

By answering these two questions, I highlight the key contributors, as well as any barriers, to the students' sense of belonging. Across the participants, the three emergent themes are as follows: feeling valued, connections with peers, and diverse interactions (see Figure 5).

| Feeling Valued | •Faculty Interactions<br>•Instructional Methods<br>•Acknowledging Muslim Identity |
|---|---|
| Connections with Peers | •Classmates and Connections through Academics<br>•Student Organizations and Friend Groups<br>•MSA |
| Diverse Interactions | •Diversity in the Classroom<br>•Programmatic Experiences<br>•Physical Spaces |
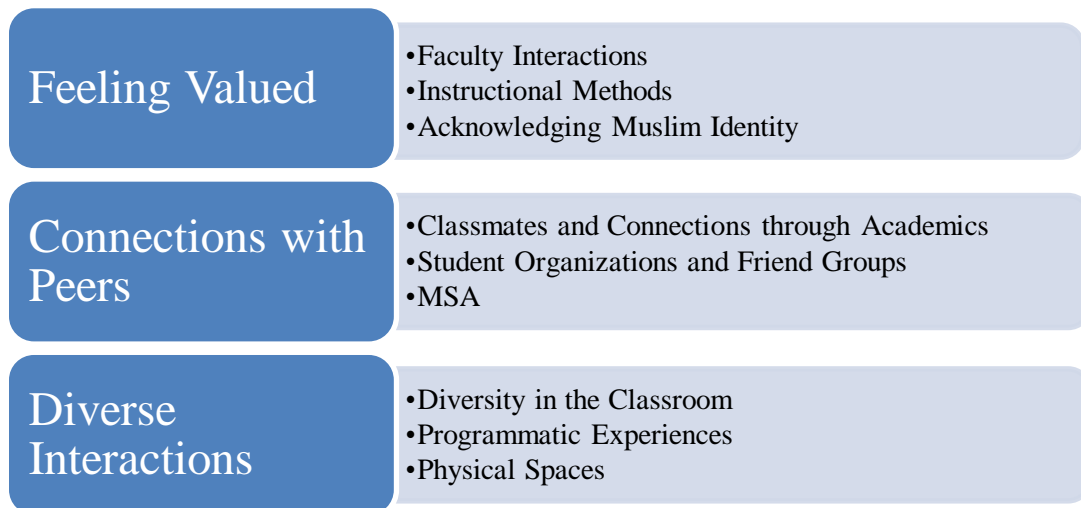
*Figure 5. Emergent themes across the cases.*

The themes used to answer the sub-central questions, when taken together, provide an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon that is first-year Muslim student belonging and address the central research question guiding this study: How do first-year Muslim

undergraduate students at an urban university in the northeastern United States describe their sense of belonging on campus?

*Feelings of Value*

Maslow (1954), Goodenow (1993), and Strayhorn (2012) emphasize feelings of being "accepted for who I am" and "valued by others" in their definitions of belonging. Across the cases, participants described situations in which they felt most "comfortable" or "at home." Though the individual experiences are different, the participants are united in their emphasis of feeling belonging when they were valued for being their whole selves, including their identity as Muslim. Participants identified instances both in and out of the classroom when they felt valued. The examples described by the participants for when they did not feel valued on campus are equally powerful. In the paragraphs that follow, I describe both in-classroom and out-of-classroom experiences that led to feeling valued, as well as those experiences that led to the participants not feeling valued on campus. First, I address the role of faculty interactions and how instructional design influences belonging. Then I discuss how the acknowledgment of their Muslim identity by others affects belonging.

Several participants identified faculty as uniquely contributing to their feelings of belonging and perceptions of "value" to the campus community. Together, the participants talked about their interactions with faculty twenty-seven times throughout their interviews with me. The participants discussed the central role faculty have in creating an environment in which students felt "cared" about. Goodenow (1993) asserts that faculty interactions, especially those outside of the classroom, are critical to belonging. All five participants referenced faculty accessibility and their willingness to

meet outside of the classroom as a key factor in their feelings of value as a student. One participant, Salim, shared,

> This one faculty member, he cared about us in and outside of the classroom…I knew where he was coming from and he was actually invested in the students and the class like it's not just like, hey, I'm here to lecture because I like teaching this topic and I get paid for it. He made sure that we knew we could reach him in or outside of the classroom.

In addition to the faculty's willingness to meet outside of the classroom, participants identified the importance of faculty stating they are available for questions and then providing information on how to get in touch with them when not in class. Saad provided the following insight, "the reiteration of those statements always help you feel comfortable." Glass et al. (2015) cite several studies focused on the role of faculty in the belonging experiences and persistence of first-year students. Specifically, the role of interpersonal relationships with faculty and how empathetic faculty are perceived to contribute to the belonging experiences of first-year students (Hoffman et al., 2003, as cited by Glass et al., 2015).

Four of the five participants viewed office hours as a way for faculty members to connect with students in more meaningful ways. Salim described engaged faculty members as follows, "they encourage participation and hold office hours…office hours are a great opportunity to get to know your professor and that also makes me feel comfortable when I don't feel comfortable in class." The emphasis on office hours is not surprising and aligns with Strayhorn's (2012) discussion on the role of faculty in the belonging experiences of students.

> Students shared how faculty members knew their name, asked about their childhoods and high school experiences, and went beyond the call of duty … The meaning that students made of these experiences was that they matter to someone

on campus … and someone would miss them if they didn't show up for class. (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 56)

Strayhorn (2012) reinforces the importance of feeling valued as a means for belonging and argues that seemingly small acts by faculty can have a tremendous influence on the belonging experiences of students.

While most of the faculty interactions described were positive, the participants also identified negative experiences. Both Kiran and Asim discussed the challenges of building relationships with faculty in the virtual learning environment. Kiran, specifically, shared her challenges taking classes in another time zone. She was not often able to attend the faculty member's scheduled office hours due to the significant time difference between Jordan and the United States. Kiran's experience is especially disheartening given the emphasis placed on office hours by the other participants in this study. Unfortunately, for Kiran, the timing of her faculty's office hours made her feel excluded and demonstrates a moment when she did not feel valued as a student. The virtual learning environment has also presented challenges in creating opportunities for engagement and interaction in the classroom.

Multiple participants identified classroom-based discussions as a means for supporting their feelings of being valued. The participants referenced the importance of the faculty member creating opportunities for interaction in the classroom, as they viewed classroom-based discussions as providing space to "share opinions" and build their confidence to be fully themselves. When the faculty member did not provide space for discussion, Kiran and Asim both shared it made them feel like their faculty members did not know them and they had a harder time connecting with faculty and peers. Goodenow (1993) suggests that other interactive instructional methods like reciprocal teaching and

81

cooperative learning are likely to support feelings of belonging in the classroom. Holley and Steiner's (2005) study emphasizes the importance of creating a respectful and safe classroom that allows students to share their views openly. Without classroom-based discussions or other interactive instructional methods, students—including the participants of this study—do not feel like a valued part of the learning community.

As previously highlighted in the presentation of Kiran's case, there have been instances when she has not been comfortable offering her perspective on a particular topic for fear of how her faculty and classmates may react. Specifically, she shares that the curriculum "it's kind of from one perspective and it's definitely not the same perspective that I've grown up understanding and that's perhaps a good thing, but also just the perspective that kind of does not include different experiences, including mine." Ladson-Billings (1995) discussed the importance of faculty recognizing that both the student and faculty member can learn from one another. In this teaching approach, there is fluidity between the teacher and the student allowing each person to share authentically about their experiences with the other (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Naeem provided a similar insight into his classroom experience. He shared that in some of the history classes he has taken certain events were presented differently "than how it actually happened…I had problems with things like that…and I understand that people like are going to think like that. And then all we can do is just educate people." Naeem's recount of his experience in the history classroom reinforces the importance of creating a learning environment in which all students have the opportunity and confidence to share their perspectives. Faculty can help to create an environment that promotes confidence and supports a

diversity of perspectives, by including opportunities for students to integrate their culture into the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

The final aspect of feeling valued presented by the participants has to do with examples of when people or institutional practices acknowledged their religious practice or faith as part of the greater university community. In this portion of the data analysis, I looked for codes such as "acceptance," "fully share," and "being myself." When searching for these codes, some common experiences emerged. The participants discussed examples of when they could bring their Muslim identity into a conversation without fear, or when a particular unit on campus tailored its service to meet their religious needs.

As part of the photo-elicitation and reflection statements portion of this study, Naeem provided a photo of him and his advisor, a non-Muslim woman, having lunch together (see Appendix E). He described the photo as an example of the community he is building at the university and his feelings of belonging as a Muslim especially "with non-Muslims accepting me as Muslim." Kiran used a similar quotation when she described her experience attending the Civic Engagement Center program. She stated,

> I felt like that was a realm that I could speak comfortably about my own experience. Like for the first time. It's not always the space for you to express who you are and you know talk about your background.

Salim described both the dining center staff and her academic advisor as making her feel valued on campus. The dining center staff were warm and welcoming and worked to help Salim find food options that aligned with her dietary needs. She did not feel as if she was a bother to them. Similarly, Salim described her academic advisors as people she "could go and talk to and they like have no business judging you. I talked to them for tips and

advice, but also just to talk about how I'm doing." Salim's experiences of feeling valued seem to line up with experiences in which she feels seen as and appreciated for being her true self. Additionally, the inclusion of halal food at the dining center may have helped Salim to feel accepted for her Muslim identity (Swisher, 2019).

Saad shared the following reflection regarding his experience attending a lecture by a scholar of Islam:

> I remember feeling incredibly proud and happy to be a part of an institution that made room for an area of my life that had typically been left up to me. The fact that I was attending a University that made room for me to learn about something as important as my religion, helped for me to feel the greatest sense of belonging.

For Saad, the invitation of a scholar of Islam to speak at the university translated into a feeling of being valued. He saw the university's investment in the speaker and the topic as an investment in his personal and religious development.

Feeling valued is one of the central ways that first-year Muslim students describe their feelings of belonging on campus. In this section, the importance of faculty interactions, instructional design, and recognition of their Muslim faith are the primary ways in which participants felt valued. Conversely, participants described feelings of not belonging when these pieces are missing. In the next section, I discuss the importance of peer connections in the belonging experiences of first-year Muslim students.

*Connections with Peers*

The participants described their connections with other students on campus in several ways. Most often, the participants referenced their friend groups or connections with other students when being asked about contributors to their sense of belonging on campus. After coding the data and pulling out the data set that aligned with Goodenow (1993)'s social connections, I created Figure 6 using a word cloud feature.

84

*Figure 6.* A word cloud capturing the connections with peers experiences of the participants.

The concept of peer connections came up in both the academic and out-of-classroom environment. The peer connections described by the participants are categorized as follows: connections with classmates, student organizations and friend groups, and connections established through the Muslim Student Association (MSA).

Three out of five participants: Asim, Saad, and Naeem described connections with academic peers or classmates as a source of belonging. Each of these participants discussed how they found connections with the other students in their specific major of study to be a part of where they found belonging at the University. Saad described himself as having strong connections with those in his academic program. He stated,

> Like I'm friends with them because I had so many classes with them. And because we have the same majors. We just came together and…we have the same goals. We like to bolster each other and we help each other out with advice.

Asim shared a similar sentiment in that he feels close to his classmates when they are preparing for an exam or a project together. Both Saad and Asim provide examples of how belonging can occur through the pursuit of a shared goal or a common interest

(Vincent, 2016). Vincent (2016) argues that college students often seek out companionship through peers with common interests, such as academic majors. Once students have established basic levels of companionship their overall confidence increases, and they move towards deeper forms of connection with others. Naeem provides an example of moving from companionship with his academic peers towards a deeper and more trusting form of connection with his academic peers. Naeem talked about peer-to-peer critiques within his graphic design program. "I've made a lot of great friends through critiques talking about each other's work and like what we can improve upon and helping each other make those changes. And it's good." Naeem's example is an important one because it highlights the depth of his relationship with his peers. Through his example, Naeem demonstrates his ability to embrace differences in perspectives and connect more deeply with his peers (Vincent, 2016).

The participants also identified their peer connections outside of the classroom as a means for cultivating belonging. Four of the five participants discussed the connections that they have made with other students outside of their academic program. Saad found community through the gym and described a moment of belonging as "the moment I was asked to postpone work to play volleyball … playing sports together makes some of the best bonding moments." For Asim, his moment of belonging was "when I was given my big brother for my frat. I felt like I was part of something larger than me and that I now have a true mentor to turn to for anything." Naeem described a photo of himself with his residence hall floor mates, as "this is the community that I in a way didn't choose, which is why it was like a family and a community that I in a way grew into." For each of these students, the shared experience of working out together, being in the same fraternity, and

living together allowed for the development of friendships. These examples support the notion that social acceptance from peers is tied to feelings of belonging (Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007, as cited by Faraj, 2019).

Of all the different types of connections with peers described, the Muslim Student Association (MSA) was the most referenced. All five participants identified the MSA as having a key role in their belonging experience at the university. Involvement with the MSA looked different for each of the participants, but collectively they referred to the MSA as an organization that fostered friendships and allowed them to celebrate their Muslim culture. The participants described their interactions as taking place both virtually and in person with members of the MSA. Participants shared that they frequently text and message other members of the MSA or meet up to have lunch and talk. The MSA provided an opportunity for social gathering, discussion, and the outward expression and celebration of their Muslim identity. Saad wrote the following reflection:

> At each of these MSA events, I remember feeling a great sense of joy for being there and an even greater sense of connectedness with my fellow Muslim Drexel students…I distinctly remember feeling greatly at ease because I was able to celebrate my American-ness and partake in a longstanding American holiday while I was surrounded by people of the same faith.

Similarly, Salim shared the following reflection: "MSA is where I felt comfortable. It was my home away from home and where I spent most of the time." The identification of the MSA as a place of belonging and support is consistent with the idea that access to in-group members has a positive influence on belonging (Strayhorn, 2012; Swisher, 2019). Faraj (2019) and Dimandja (2017) both found the presence of an MSA to be critical for Muslim students to feel represented and welcomed on campus. Dimandja (2017) writes that the MSA is "a safe space in which they could freely express their religious identity

87

without being discriminated against, easily make social connections…, and connect and interact with others from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds" (p. 144). Given the key role the MSA plays for many Muslim students, campus leaders must seek out opportunities to support the organization.

This section explored the role of peer connections in the belonging experiences of first-year Muslim students on campus. Participants reported connections with their academic peers, friend groups, and the MSA to be most critical in their overall feelings of belonging.

*Diverse Interactions*

Findings from this study corroborate the work of Locks et al. (2008) which found that feelings of belonging increased through interactions among peers from diverse backgrounds. All five participants discussed the role that diverse interactions played in their experiences of belonging in both the classroom and out-of-the-classroom. Participants described the importance of diverse interactions across three areas: in the classroom environment, through programmatic experiences, and in physical spaces on campus.

All five of the participants acknowledged an experience being the only Muslim in the classroom. In each of these instances, the participants were careful to position their experience in contrast to the overall diversity observed at the institution. For example, Kiran, Salim, Naeem, and Saad all referenced the fact that they are the only Muslims in their classes, but that they know other Muslim students on campus. Individually, they rationalized the phenomenon by stating that the other Muslim students were not interested in their area or majors of study. Only one participant noted the lack of Muslim

faculty in their program. There is limited research around compositional diversity and the impact on Muslim students; however, findings from Rockenbach et al. (2014) and Faraj (2019) report that religious minority students have limited interactions with faculty, staff, and students of the same religious affiliation on campus. While most of the participants shared that they had come to terms with the lack of Muslims in their classes, one participant, Salim, shared she felt more comfortable in larger classroom spaces versus smaller labs. Salim described her experience as follows:

> I'm not gonna lie. I would look around, sometimes, like, wow, this is a big lecture. And like in my labs, I was the only Muslim Student. And in my lectures, I wasn't. In my lectures, there was a group of us, which just made me feel more comfortable.

Salim's increased comfort in the larger and more diverse lecture setting aligns with research showing that perceptions of diversity in the student population impact the adjustment experiences of minority students (Hurtado, Griffin, Arellano, and Cuellar, 2008, as cited in Faraj, 2019). Five out of five participants shared that the diversity of the student population was a contributing factor in their decision to attend the University. Future research should explore the impact perceived and actual compositional diversity has on the belonging experiences of Muslim students.

When asked about the campus experiences that contributed to feelings of belonging, five of five participants discussed specific programmatic experiences they had during their initial time with the University. Four of five participants referenced the University orientation program for new students, Welcome Week, as a means for creating belonging. The participants described Welcome Week as a way to meet other students, of diverse backgrounds, and feel a greater connection to the University. Saad shared the following about his experience with Welcome Week:

I met a lot of people through Welcome Week. I met so many different kinds of people. And I really enjoy it. I love meeting people so for me, that was a really enjoyable experience. I made so many friends from, you know, all over, like the country, and not even just the country but like around the world. And so that environment really helped me feel like, oh, this is a place where I want to be. This is where a place where I enjoy to be.

In addition to Welcome Week, participants reported other programmatic experiences that reinforced their perceptions of diversity on campus. One participant discussed the Involvement Fair as a particularly meaningful belonging experience. Through the experience, Salim shared that she felt connected to the University community and "saw the diversity" of the University. She went on to describe the experience making her feel "so comfortable and proud."

Three of five participants connected physical locations on campus with feelings of belonging. The remaining two participants had not been on campus and therefore could not comment on the physical campus. Participants mentioned four distinct campus locations (see Table 6) in connection with feelings of belonging. Each of the physical locations described by the participants served as a space for connection with other students. While the mention of the gym, coffee lounge area, and design studios is interesting, the Intercultural Center stands out because all the participants that have physically spent time on campus referenced it as meaningful.

The identification of the Intercultural Center is important for two reasons. The location serves as a recognized place of diversity and houses dedicated space for the faith-based communities on campus. Faraj (2019) argues that a Muslim prayer space on campus contributes to belonging by ensuring that Muslim students are valued and recognized on campus.

Table 6

*Campus Locations Connected with Belonging*

| Participant | Gym | Starbucks and Lounge Area | Design Studios | Intercultural Center |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Asim | - | - | - | - |
| Saad | X | - | - | X |
| Kiran | - | - | - | - |
| Salim | - | X | - | X |
| Naeem | - | - | X | X |

Similarly, Nasir and Al-Amin (2006) report that access to physical spaces that support the practice of Islam is particularly meaningful for Muslim students and speaks to a broader student community that is accepting of Islam. The Intercultural Center (ICC) served as a haven and hub of socialization for the participants. Salim described the Intercultural Center as follows:

> I would see people who weren't Muslims. The Christian community was also in the same building … campus is very diverse and I feel as though having inclusive, diverse areas is what contributes to my experience of belonging. For me, that place happened to be the ICC, not only because that was MSA's common space, but also because I think there was cultural competence.

Another participant, Naeem, described the ICC as a place not just for Muslim students, but other religious organizations. He described how he would sit in on some of the Christian organization meetings and participate in spiritual discussions.

Diverse interactions and the perception of diversity are critical to Muslim students belonging on campus. Whether it is because there is comfort in diversity—meaning the students feel like they blend in and are one of many diverse bodies on campus or if the compositional diversity messages a commitment to belonging, I am not sure. It is clear;

however, that the participants felt a greater sense of comfort and fit when in situations of diversity or when with other in-group (Muslim) students. Maestas et al. (2007, as cited in Strayhorn, 2012) support my assertion regarding the importance of diverse interactions and perceived diversity on campus through their claim that in addition to classroom and social integration, perceptions of diversity positively affect belonging.

*Discussion*

The focus of this study was to understand the belonging experiences of first-year Muslim students at an urban college campus. This study examined both the in-classroom and out-of-classroom experiences that contribute to feelings of belonging. In Chapter One, I discussed the rationale for this study and its importance in the context of higher education. I also introduced the theoretical framework guiding this study (Goodenow, 1993; Maslow, 1954; and Strayhorn, 2012). In Chapter Two, I overviewed the existing literature related to student belonging and religious or Muslim identity in college. Through the literature review, I highlighted the lack of research related to religious identity and student belonging. More specifically, I identified the absence of research focused on understanding the belonging experiences of first-year Muslim students in higher education. In Chapter Three, I detailed the methodology employed in this qualitative research study. I shared the steps utilized in data collection and data analysis, as well as the validation strategies and ethical considerations. In Chapter Four, I introduced the findings of this research study and answered the sub-central research questions:

1. How do first-year Muslim students describe their feelings of belonging in the classroom?

2. How do first-year Muslim students describe their sense of belonging outside of the classroom?

3. What are the key components/experiences contributing to first-year Muslim students' sense of belonging?

4. What conditions/experiences contribute to first-year Muslim students feeling unconnected or unwelcome as if they do not belong?

For this phenomenological case study, I utilized in-case and across-case analyses to provide insight into the lived belonging experiences of five first-year Muslim students. I conducted in-case analysis and answered the sub-research questions focused on understanding both the academic belonging experiences as well as the out-of-classroom or social belonging experiences of the participants. In-case analysis revealed that the participants had both experiences of belonging as well as experiences where they felt less connected. The cases reinforced that belonging is a basic human need connected to motivation and the ability to achieve higher-level needs (Maslow, 1954; Strayhorn, 2012). Additionally, the cases demonstrated that belonging happens both in and out of the classroom (Goodenow, 1993) and there are specific experiences that contribute to feelings of belonging in the academic environment. The individual cases further highlighted Strayhorn's (2012) assertion that feelings of belonging are heightened at certain times for specific populations.

An across-case analysis yielded three emergent and key themes: feelings of value, connections to peers, and diverse interactions. These themes together answer the sub-central questions focused on identifying the components or experiences contributing to first-year belonging experiences. Feelings of value, connections to peers, and diverse interactions provide an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon that is first-year Muslim student belonging. Throughout this section, I address the central research

question for this study: How do first-year Muslim undergraduate students at an urban university in the northeastern United States describe their sense of belonging on campus?

This study identified specific experiences that supported and detracted from feelings of belonging for the participants. Five of five participants self-rated their feelings of belonging at a five or higher on a scale of one through ten (see Table 7).

Table 7

*Participant Self-reported Scores of Belonging*

| Participant | Self-rated Score of Belonging (Scale of 1–10) |
|---|---|
| Asim | 8 |
| Saad | 9.5 |
| Kiran | 5 |
| Salim | 8 |
| Naeem | 8 |

This self-reported measure indicates that the participants have experienced belonging at various points during their time with the University. Strayhorn (2012) asserts; however, that gains in belonging may not be static. Thus, practitioners in higher education need to understand how the themes from this study translate into systemic or institutionalized means for supporting belonging. The emergent themes of this study speak to how first-year Muslim students experience belonging on campus. Feelings of value, connections to peers, and diverse interactions are themes that align with the literature focused on college student belonging and reinforce the notion that belonging happens both in and out of the

classroom for students (Astin, 1984; Goodenow, 1993; Maslow, 1954; O'Keeffe, 2013; Strayhorn, 2012; Tinto, 1993; Tachine et al., 2017).

Students need to integrate socially and academically into the campus community to persist or remain enrolled in college (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Tinto, 1993). Participants in this study discussed examples of belonging in both academic and social contexts; however, the role of faculty cannot be underestimated. Each of the participants discussed the impact of their ability to connect—or not with faculty. Goodenow (1993) emphasizes the importance of faculty interactions with students outside of the classroom in belonging. Hoffman et al. (2003, as cited by Glass et al., 2015) further support this notion by claiming that interpersonal relationships with faculty and how empathetic faculty are perceived are tied to the belonging experiences of first-year students. Additionally, this study aligned with prior research linking pedagogy and curriculum to the belonging experiences of students (Elbih, 2013). Participants in this study shared feelings of misfit or frustration with U.S.-centered conversations about world events. Elbih (2013) describes the challenges that exist for Muslim students when classroom conversations are not representative of or allow for Muslim perspectives to be considered.

This study also highlighted the out-of-classroom or social belonging experiences of first-year Muslim students. The participants described how their connections with peers and diverse interactions influenced their feelings of belonging on campus. For the majority of participants, it was the interactions outside of the classroom that most affected their overall sense of belonging. The emphasis on social experiences is not surprising as researchers are starting to conclude that social experiences are better

95

determinants of belonging than academic experiences (Locks et al., 2008). In this study, the social belonging experiences of the participants fell into two categories: connections with peer groups and observations and interactions of diversity. Existing literature on belonging has tied both of these factors to belonging experiences for students in college.

Finding a group of peers in college aligns with Maslow's (1954) notion that belonging is a basic human need. Strayhorn (2012) builds on Maslow's assertion that belonging is fundamental and says that it becomes more critical when and where individuals are more likely to feel isolated, invisible, or lonely. The transition to college is a challenge for students generally and for marginalized students, like Muslims, the belonging needs in the first year may be more critical. Tachine et al. (2017) write, "the first weeks of college are a pivotal time when student affairs practitioners focus attention on social activities and students' adjustments to campus in hopes of reducing students' loneliness by connecting them to campus services and peers" (p. 794). The participants in this study shared that the University-sponsored orientation program, Welcome Week, was useful in connecting them to other students on campus. Participants also described connecting with other students through shared-interest groups like student organizations, academic majors, fraternities, and religious organizations (Strayhorn, 2012; Vincent, 2016). The participants in this study cited the Muslim Student Association (MSA) as providing a true sense of belonging. Access to in-group members achieved through interactions with MSA students likely heightened these feelings of belonging. The identification of the MSA as a place of community is consistent with findings from other studies focused on the college experiences of Muslim students (Dimandja, 2017; Faraj, 2019; Strayhorn, 2012; Swisher, 2019).

The participants identified the Intercultural Center (ICC) as a physical location on campus tied to feelings of belonging. A physical location with Muslim-centered resources like dedicated prayer space and foot-washing stations allows students to uphold their religious or cultural identity while on campus. Additionally, the physical space promotes interactions with other Muslim students and supports feelings of belonging through access to in-group members (Tachine et al., 2017). Participants described it not only as a visible demonstration of the University's commitment to the Muslim community but as a place, that supports religious diversity. The ICC housed not only Muslim-specific spaces but also provided space for other religious groups on campus, including Christian and Jewish organizations. The ICC provided both a sense of place for Muslim students as well as the opportunity to interact with a diverse network of peers. Locks et al. (2008) found students who spent time socializing and positively interacting with diverse peers experienced greater feelings of belonging. This study reinforces the importance of integrating both identity-specific spaces and community spaces into campus design.

This study sought to understand the belonging experiences of first-year Muslim students and found that feelings of being valued, connection to peers, and diverse interactions were consistent across the participants. This study also highlighted that participants had the most positive experiences of belonging when they felt comfortable with and valued for sharing their full selves, including their Muslim identity, with faculty and peers. Additionally, access to in-group members like the MSA as well as Muslim-specific spaces and resources helped students in navigating their identities as both students and Muslims on campus. The greatest contribution of this study; however, is further insight into the lived belonging experiences of first-year Muslim students as they

97

transition to college life. While other studies have focused on the experiences of Muslim students, this study filled an important gap, as it focused on a critical period in student life—the first year.

*Implications*

As shared in the previous section, this study contributes to the body of knowledge regarding Muslim student experiences of belonging in college. This study differs in that it focuses on the first-year belonging experiences of Muslim students. In Chapter One, I presented the rationale for this study which included highlighting the importance of student belonging, as well as the unique challenges facing Muslim Americans in a post-9/11 world. I discussed the role of colleges and universities in supporting students as they transition into college and how marginalized students may have heightened needs for belonging during high-stress or isolating situations like the first year of college (Strayhorn, 2012). In this section, I overview how the results of this study can be applied to future practice on college and university campuses. After proposing improvements for practice, I recommend several areas for future research.

This study contributes to the body of research which supports that student belonging happens through both academically and socially based experiences (Astin, 1984; Goodenow, 1993; Maslow, 1954; O'Keeffe, 2013; Strayhorn, 2012; Tinto, 1993; Tachine et al., 2017). As such, university administrators and faculty must find ways to support students in feeling valued, fitting in, and finding ways to contribute to their community (Goodenow, 1993; Maslow, 1954; Strayhorn, 2012). The stakes for finding belonging are important for all students; however, the need is even more critical for students that may feel marginalized or socially stigmatized (Goodenow, 1993). While

there have been relatively significant amounts of research on the student belonging experiences of marginalized students, very little research exists with a focus on Muslim student belonging and the belonging of first-year Muslim students specifically (Bowman & Smedley, 2013). Three key themes emerged as a part of this study: feelings of being valued, connections with peers, and diverse interactions. Together these themes answer the question of how first-year Muslim students experience belonging on a college campus. Each theme also provides valuable insights into how university administrators and faculty can support the belonging experiences of this student population.

Both Goodenow (1993) and Strayhorn (2012) emphasize the importance of "feeling valued" as part of student belonging. This study provided examples of how first-year Muslim students experienced moments of feeling valued, as well as when they experienced not feeling valued. In the classroom, their feelings of being valued largely connected with the relationships and interactions they had with their faculty members, as well as the pedagogical approach of the instructor. Bowman and Small (2012) found that student affairs practitioners and university administrators are not well versed or knowledgeable of the world's major religions, including Islam. Thus, faculty may benefit from specific training on how to engage in conversations with students around religious diversity and religious accommodations (Zamulinsky, 2020). Most faculty include statements on their syllabus directing students how to seek disability accommodations, but many do not include statements specific to religious needs. This study shared the importance of faculty not only including information on how students can reach out to them but on the value of repeating those statements in the classroom. In addition, faculty members may need more awareness around how the academic calendar may conflict with

the faith practices of religiously diverse students (Zamulinsky, 2020). Bowman and Smedley (2013) write, "Christian privilege is widespread and often unquestioned at U.S. colleges and universities, ranging from the scheduling of the academic calendar around Christian holidays to the lack of consideration of dietary customs for non-Christian religious observances" (p. 747). Through increased awareness and skill-building, faculty may feel more comfortable talking with students about their faith practices and helping them to navigate both their academic and faith-based obligations (Zamulinsky, 2020).

Peer connections are a key component in the belonging experiences of first-year Muslim students. This finding is not surprising given the emphasis placed on social integration as a means for establishing belonging (Astin, 1984; Goodenow, 1993; Strayhorn, 2012; Tinto, 1993; Vincent, 2016). In specific, participants in this study identified the Muslim Student Association (MSA) as the primary means for establishing connections with other Muslim students on campus. This finding is consistent with other studies focused on the college experiences of Muslim students. The MSA fosters friendship through access to in-group members while also centering Muslim culture for students (Dimandja, 2017; Faraj, 2019; Strayhorn, 2012; Swisher, 2019). Student affairs practitioners should consider how they are supporting identity-based student organizations, such as the MSA when looking at resource allocation including organizational funding and space. The MSA is an important factor in the belonging experiences of first-year Muslim students. Similarly, access to physical space that supports the faith-based practices of Muslim students is important and necessary (Nasir & Al-Amin, 2006). The findings of this study support prior research that indicates identity-based spaces like the Intercultural Center (ICC) identified in this study serve to

100

acknowledge the cultural backgrounds of students, provide space for community building among the identity group, and demonstrate a campus that is welcoming of marginalized identities (Nasir & Al-Amin, 2006; Tachine et al., 2017). It is noteworthy; however, that this study found the ICC to be connected to first-year belonging not only because it allowed for Muslim faith-based practices and community building. This study highlighted that the ICC was also a place that supported diverse interactions and religious pluralism. University administrators and campus planners should consider this finding when allocating and designing student spaces on campus. There is a need for both identity-specific spaces, as well as those that support diverse interactions and serve to highlight the multicultural vibrancy of the campus community.

Strayhorn (2012) identifies a gap in the research related to the belonging experiences of college students by stating, "We have yet to discern specific attributes or experiences that are most likely to yield the outcomes we desire for students" (p. 14). The desired outcome is belonging and I agree with Strayhorn (2012) that there is still so much to understand about the belonging experiences of students. This study served to strengthen my belief that belonging happens both in and out of the classroom. This study supported previous research that noted the influence diverse interactions have on belonging (Strayhorn, 2012). Future studies should consider the role in which perceptions of diversity and inclusion on campus influence the belonging experiences of first-year Muslim students. Cabrera et al. (1999) and Locks et al. (2008) found a hostile campus climate to influence social and academic outcomes negatively. Understanding perceptions of diversity and inclusion during the first year on campus may help tease out the extent to which campus climate supports belonging.

101

Additionally, further research might consider a deeper dive into specific programmatic experiences like, new student orientation, to understand the key interactions or incidents that led to feelings of belonging. A more detailed understanding of who, what, where, and how of the orientation program may yield more useful insights for practitioners seeking to onboard first-year Muslim students. Finally, this study highlighted the first-year belonging experiences of Muslim students. A look at the first-year belonging experiences of other religious minorities may yield a greater understanding of how universities and colleges can support religious plurality and the belonging experiences of a diverse student body.

*Summary and Conclusion*

This study brought greater understanding to the belonging experiences of first-year Muslim students, a population of students that have received little attention up until now. Islam is the third-largest religious identity in the United States (Pew Research Center, 2021), and therefore institutions of higher education must consider how to best support the needs of Muslim students on campus. U.S. colleges and universities, including secular institutions, continue to operate in Christian-centric ways, which can affect the experiences of religious minorities on campus (Bowman & Smedley, 2013). A student's sense of belonging contributes to retention and other positive student outcomes in higher education (Strayhorn, 2012; Tinto, 1993). Research highlights that social and academic integration or belonging is critical during periods of transition, as in the first year of college (Strayhorn, 2012). Additionally, marginalized students have heightened needs of belonging during periods of transition (Strayhorn, 2012). This study focused on

understanding the belonging experiences of first-year Muslim students to promote better practices of support during a critical time in their time at the University.

I utilized a qualitative phenomenological case study to explore the belonging experiences of first-year Muslim students on campus. A combination of interviews, photo-elicitation, and reflection statements provided the data in support of understanding the lived experiences of five participants at an urban university in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Data were analyzed using an a priori framework influenced by Maslow (1954), Goodenow (1993), and Strayhorn (2012). First, I conducted a within-case analysis followed by an across-case analysis. The across-case analysis identified three themes across all cases (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Feelings of being valued, connections with peers, and diverse interactions contributed to the belonging experiences of the participants both in and out of the classroom. Together these themes answer the central research question guiding this study: How do first-year Muslim undergraduate students at an urban university in the northeastern United States describe their sense of belonging on campus?

Because of this study, university and college administrators and faculty are equipped with a better understanding of the lived experiences of first-year Muslim students. The belonging experiences of these students highlighted the importance of facilitating in-classroom belonging experiences through faculty-student relationships and a pedagogical approach. Additionally, this study reinforced the need for institutions of higher education to create opportunities for both in-group connections as well as diverse interactions. Finally, institutions of higher education must seek to support religious plurality through increased understanding of religious diversity and the allocation of

resources towards programs, spaces, and student organizations. Chapter Five provides informed recommendations for how institutions of higher education can move forward with implementing the findings of this study.

CHAPTER FIVE

Distribution of Findings

*Executive Summary*

This chapter overviews the purpose of the study including data collection and analysis, a summary of key findings, and informed recommendations. Additionally, the chapter discusses a plan for distributing the findings to three target audiences: faculty, student affairs practitioners, and campus planners. Finally, this chapter defines a plan for sharing the study findings with participants and the Muslim Student Association.

*Introduction*

U.S. colleges and universities, including secular institutions, continue to uphold Christian-centered practices and curriculum, which is a continual reminder of the Christian privilege that exists on campus (Bowman & Smedley, 2013). Because Islam has grown to be the third-largest religious identity in the United States (Pew Research Center, 2021), colleges and universities must adapt to support a growing population of students that identify as Muslim. Further complicating this situation is the fact that college students today have grown up in a post-9/11 world, which is a world with increased attention on Muslims (Nasir & Al-Admin, 2006). More recently, anti-Muslim rhetoric as part of the 2016 Trump presidential campaign and subsequent executive orders under the Trump administration have reignited feelings of Islamophobia in the U.S. (Jamal, 2017). Together these factors beg college and university administrators to evaluate their support of Muslim students on campus.

Sense of belonging contributes to the overall success of students in college, particularly as it relates to academic motivation and retention of students (Freeman et al., 2007; Gerrard & Billington, 2014; Goodenow, 1993; O'Keeffe, 2013; Strayhorn, 2012). Strayhorn (2012) asserts that feelings of belonging become critical for students during certain points in their academic career, such as times of transition. Additionally, students of marginalized identities may have heightened needs to belong (Strayhorn, 2012). While there has been some research centered on the belonging experiences of students in college, there has been very little focus on the belonging experiences of students as it relates to religious identity (Bowman & Smedley, 2013).

This study focused on understanding the lived belonging experiences of first-year Muslim students at a university in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The focus on Muslim student belonging during their first year clarifies how to better support this specific student population during a particularly important point in their college experience.

*Overview of Data Collection and Analysis Procedures*

This phenomenological case study utilized interviews, photo-elicitation, and reflection statements to interpret and understand the lived experiences of five first-year Muslim students and answer the central research question: How do first-year Muslim undergraduate students describe their sense of belonging on campus? Both data collection and data analysis were guided by an a priori framework (see Figure 1) influenced by Maslow (1954), Goodenow (1993), and Strayhorn (2012). Participants identified as practicing Muslims, traditional-aged, 18–22 years old, and had a connection to the Muslim Student Association (MSA) on campus. I collected data during November 2020, utilizing a blended sample of students who started at the University between fall 2019

and fall 2020, a special consideration due to the impact of COVID-19. Four of the five students were first-generation U.S. citizens with one participant identifying as an international student from Jordan. Two participants were women and three participants identified as men. Due to COVID-19, all of the participants were living off-campus with their families versus living in on-campus or close-to-campus housing.

Each participant signed a consent form and participated in a 45-minute, semi-structured interview. To adhere to COVID-19 in-person meeting restrictions, I utilized the Zoom platform to conduct and record the interviews. I uploaded the interview recordings, transcripts, and researcher notes into DeDoose for safekeeping and future analysis. After the interview, each participant received information and directions regarding the next phase of the study—a photo-elicitation and reflection exercise (see Appendix D). Upon receipt, I uploaded all photos and reflection statements into DeDoose. First, I analyzed each case data utilizing the theoretical framework of Maslow (1954), Goodenow (1993), and Strayhorn (2012). Specifically, I analyzed each case to understand the participants' belonging experiences in the classroom and out-of-the-classroom. After concluding the in-case analysis, I conducted an across-case analysis, a thematic analysis, and identified themes to answer the central and sub-central research questions.

*Summary of Key Findings*

Three key themes emerged as a part of this study: feelings of being valued, connections with peers, and diverse interactions (see Figure 5). Together these themes answer the question of how first-year Muslim students experience belonging on a college campus. While each of the participants provided unique examples and descriptions of

their belonging experiences, their feelings of belonging align in that they took place both in and out of the classroom (Goodenow, 1993) and along the three identified themes. I over the three key findings the paragraphs that follow.

Maslow (1954), Goodenow (1993), and Strayhorn (2012) define belonging utilizing the terms, "accepted for who I am" and "valued by others." The participants in this study made similar references to feelings of being valued in their examples of belonging as well as in their examples of not feeling belonging. Participants shared that faculty play a central role in their feelings of belonging on campus. Faculty members can support students' feelings of being valued by working to establish relationships with students and making themselves available outside of the classroom (Glass et al., 2015; Goodenow, 1993). Participants also discussed the importance of integrating classroom discussions into course instruction as a means for promoting feelings of being valued. Participants voiced feeling less comfortable sharing their opinions and connecting with peers and faculty without safe classroom discussion spaces.

The second theme that emerged as a part of this study was the importance of connecting with peers. All of the participants discussed their experiences interacting with peers, both in academic and social settings. Specifically, the participants described two types of connections with peers: connections with classmates, student organizations and friend groups, and connections established through the Muslim Student Association (MSA). The identification of the MSA as a key means for peer connection and socialization aligns with other research focused on the college experiences of Muslim students (Dimandja, 2017; Faraj, 2019; Strayhorn, 2012; Swisher, 2019).

The final theme identified through this study was diverse interactions and their connection with feelings of belonging. Locks et al. (2008) found that feelings of belonging increase through interactions with diverse peers. Participants described the importance of diverse interactions across three areas: in the classroom environment, through programmatic experiences, and in physical spaces on campus.

*Informed Recommendations*

Strayhorn (2012) emphasized the belonging needs of students may be heightened during certain times and in specific contexts and for particular identities, like students of marginalized identities who may be more likely to feel isolated or socially stigmatized. Because of this study, college and university administrators and faculty are equipped with greater insight into the lived belonging experiences of several first-year Muslim students during a period of transition. The three key themes highlighted in this study: feelings of being valued, connections with peers, and diverse interactions all contribute to how first-year Muslim students describe their sense of belonging on campus. As such, I offer the following recommendations for change in practice and policies so that first-year Muslim students may have greater institutional support behind their transition to campus and feelings of belonging.

First, universities must equip faculty with best practices for supporting religious diversity in the classroom environment. Faculty play a central role in the academic belonging experiences of students (Glass et al., 2015; Strayhorn, 2012) and they must understand how to create spaces that allow for the perspectives of students from a variety of faith backgrounds. The smallest gestures have a great impact in terms of student belonging in the classroom (Strayhorn, 2012), thus finding ways to acknowledge a

student's faith when reviewing the course calendar or getting to know a student through office hours can make a huge difference in a student's feelings of being valued.

Second, new student orientation programs should include both opportunities for diverse interactions, as well as connections to peers with similar interests and identities. Hurtado et al. (2008, as cited in Faraj, 2019) found that students link their perceptions of diversity on campus with feelings of belonging; therefore, new student orientation programs may benefit from finding ways to bring diverse groups of students together. Creating opportunities for students to observe the diversity and interact with those that are different from them, may support feelings of belonging (Locks et al., 2008). The participants in this study shared that they felt most comfortable in diverse settings or with students that shared an academic or social interest or identity with them. While many new student orientations create resources or opportunities to highlight student organizations on campus, it may be useful to support, sponsor, or resource more intentional interactions between new students and identity and interest-based organizations.

Finally, campus planning must consider student spaces that promote diverse interactions and those that allow for the recognition of underrepresented identities on campus. The Intercultural Center was identified as a place of belonging not only because of the Muslim prayer rooms, but because it allowed for interaction with the other faith-based communities on campus. Campus planners and designers must include dedicated space for Muslim students, as these spaces allow for the safe practice of Islam and demonstrate the institution's commitment to religious diversity.

*Findings Distribution Proposal*

The findings of this study target college and university faculty and staff members, as these stakeholders are best positioned to integrate the findings of this study into their daily work. Faculty members play a critical role in the belonging experiences of students both in the classroom and outside of the classroom environment (Goodenow, 1993; Glass et al., 2015); therefore, their understanding and application of these findings support the belonging experiences of first-year Muslim students on their campus. By integrating a focus on creating feelings of being valued, as well as facilitating diverse interactions, faculty can support not only first-year Muslim students but also students of diverse backgrounds.

Professional staff members in the areas of student affairs and campus planning and design and engineer programs, services, and physical spaces that can support the belonging of first-year Muslim students. As a profession, student affairs is committed to supporting the developmental needs of students outside of the classroom and most commonly includes the areas of campus activities, counseling, orientation, and student conduct (NASPA, 2014). Given the reach and influence on the student experience, student affairs practitioners are integral to the integration of services, programs, and resources that support the findings of this study. In addition to student affairs professionals, I will share the findings of this study with those responsible for campus planning and design on campus. Campus planning and design professionals are often responsible for integrating the diversity and inclusion goals of the institution into the physical spaces of the campus. Their understanding of religious diversity and Islam specifically is essential to supporting Muslim students on campus.

Because this study will be shared with three separate audiences: faculty, student affairs practitioners, and campus planning and design professionals, the means for distributing the findings need to be flexible. The researcher will prepare a professional presentation for key stakeholders to introduce the audience to the findings and discuss opportunities for integrating change within their sphere of practice. A professional presentation for faculty will be delivered at the Student Life Committee for the University's Faculty Senate. The researcher will contact the chair of the committee and request to be included as part of an upcoming agenda. The presentation will last approximately 20 minutes and include time for discussion afterward. The researcher will deliver the findings for the student affairs and campus planning and design groups in two ways. The first means for distributing findings will be with senior leadership for both groups as part of a DEI planning conversation. A professional presentation will be prepared; however, the researcher will also include handouts so that she can adapt the presentation based on time constraints. After presenting to the leadership of both groups, the researcher will conduct a brown bag discussion as part of the professional development series offered to all employees within the student affairs unit. This way, practitioners throughout the unit can learn about the findings and discuss how best to apply the key findings to practice.

Finally, the study participants and campus MSA will receive a special communication regarding the findings of this study. The communication will include a one-page summary of findings and a note of appreciation from the researcher. In addition, spiritual and religious leaders on campus will receive a copy of the one-page

summary. The faith-based community leaders on campus include both the university chaplains and religious student organization officers.

*Conclusion*

Islam remains largely misunderstood by non-Muslim people in the United States (Schaidle, 2016). This lack of knowledge and awareness trickles down to American college campuses and affects the lived experiences of Muslim students. This study recorded and interpreted the belonging experiences of five first-year Muslim students on a college campus in Philadelphia. The results indicate that experiences both in and out of the classroom influenced contributed to their feelings of belonging on campus. Specifically, the findings identify that experiences that foster feelings of being valued, opportunities to develop connections with peers, and the ability to interact in a diverse setting are central to how this population of students experienced belonging. This research lays an important foundation for understanding how religious identity connects with student belonging on a college campus. As college campuses in the United States become more diverse, institutions of higher education must consider religious diversity in the allocation of resources and efforts to support students from many identities.

APPENDICES

Participant Consent Form

**BU** | Baylor University
**SCHOOL OF EDUCATION**
EdD-Learning and Organizational Change

Consent Form for Research

PROTOCOL TITLE:    **A phenomenological case study to explore how first-year undergraduate Muslim students experience a sense of belonging on a college campus in the northeastern United States**

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:    **Katie Zamulinsky, Doctoral Candidate**

SUPPORTED BY:    **Tony Talbert, Ed.D.**

| **Invitation to be part of a Research Study** |
|---|

You are invited to be part of a research study. This consent form will help you choose whether or not to participate in the study. Feel free to ask if anything is not clear in this consent form.

| **Important Information about this Research Study** |
|---|

The study adds to the knowledge of student retention on a college campus by focusing on how first-year Muslim students experience a sense of belonging. The information gained through this research better equips university administrators to target resources, programs, and services to a more diverse student population ultimately impacting the retention goals of the institution. This qualitative phenomenological case study relies on interviews, photo-elicitation, and reflection statements to give voice to the lived experiences of several first-year, Muslim students at an urban college in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The primary research questions are:

*How do first-year Muslim undergraduate students at an urban university in the northeastern United States describe their sense of belonging on campus?* and *What is it like to be a first-year Muslim student on campus?*

To participate, you must meet the following:
1. Self-identify as Muslim
2. Traditional-aged (18–22) years old
3. Current full-time undergraduate student
4. Began enrollment at Drexel University in either Fall 2019 or Fall 2020

If you choose to participate, you will be asked to participate in a 60-minute interview over Zoom during the Fall 2020 term. Additionally, you will be asked to provide a written response to 3 reflection questions and submit 1-3 photos that represent your experience of belonging at the University.

Risks or discomforts associated with your participation in this study are not anticipated to be greater than those experienced in everyday life.

There is no direct benefit to participating in this study.

Taking part in this research study is voluntary. You do not have to participate, and you can stop at any time.

More detailed information may be described later in this form. Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research study.

### Why is this study being done?

The purpose of this study is to understand the lived belonging experiences of first-year Muslim students on a college campus in Philadelphia, PA.

### What will happen if I take part in this research study?

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to **complete the following steps:**

• Zoom Interview: Participants will complete a 60-minute interview over Zoom in which they will be asked a series of questions related to their experiences at the institution. Participants will be recorded and all information collected will be stored in a secure database.

• Reflection Question Responses: After completing the interview portion of this study, participants will be asked to answer 3 reflection questions and submit their

responses via email. Participants will also be asked to submit 1-3 photos or visuals (social media post, flyer, etc.) that represent their experiences of belonging on campus.

**How long will I be in this study and how many people will be in the study?**

Participation in this study will last until the interview and reflection question portions are completed, with the goal of having all data collected by the end of Fall Term 2020. Approximately 3 – 5 participants will take part in this research study.

**What are the risks of taking part in this research study?**

We don't believe there are any risks from participating in this research.

**Are there any benefits from being in this research study?**

Although you will not directly benefit from being in this study, others might benefit because the information learned from the study may provide valuable insight into how the programs, services, and resources at the institution can better support the belonging experiences of Muslim undergraduate students.

**How Will You Protect my Information?**

A risk of taking part in this study is the possibility of a loss of confidentiality. The records of this study confidential in a password-protected data management site. Each participant will be assigned a pseudonym.

The following people or groups may review your study records for purposes such as quality control or safety:
- Representatives of Baylor University and the BU Institutional Review Board
- Federal and state agencies that oversee or review research (such as the HHS Office of Human Research Protection or the Food and Drug Administration)

The results of this study may also be used for teaching, publications, or presentations at professional meetings. If your individual results are discussed, your identity will be protected by using a pseudonym rather than your name or other identifying information.

By law, researchers must release certain information to the appropriate authorities if they have reasonable cause to believe any of the following:
- Abuse or neglect of a child
- Abuse, neglect, or exploitation of an elderly person or disabled adult
- Risk of harming yourself or others

- Alleged incidents of sexual harassment, sexual assault, dating violence, or stalking, committed by or against a person enrolled at or employed by Drexel University at the time of the incident

**Will I be compensated for being part of the study?**

Participants will be provided with a $50 Amazon gift card upon the completion of their interview and reflection questions. If you do not complete the entire study, you will not receive compensation.

**Your Participation in this Study is Voluntary**

Taking part in this study is your choice. You are free not to take part or to withdraw at any time for any reason. No matter what you decide, there will be no penalty or loss of benefit to which you are entitled. If you decide to withdraw from this study, the information that you have already provided will be kept confidential. You cannot withdraw information collected before your withdrawal.

**Contact Information for the Study Team and Questions about the Research**

If you have any questions about this research, you may contact:
Katie Zamulinsky
Phone: 484-574-4953
Email: kep33@drexel.edu or Katie_zamulinsky1@baylor.edu

Or

Dr. Tony Talbert
Email: tony_talbert@baylor.edu

**Contact Information for Questions about Your Rights as a Research Participant**

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact the following:

Baylor University Institutional Review Board
Office of the Vice Provost for Research
Phone: 254-710-3708
Email: irb@baylor.edu

**Your Consent**

By clicking "I Agree", you are agreeing to be in this study. We will give you a copy of this document for your records. We will keep a copy with the study records.  If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

*I understand what the study is about and my questions so far have been answered. I agree to take part in this study.*


_____                    _____

Signature of Subject                                                                 Date

APPENDIX B

Interview Protocol: Fall Term 2020


*Open and Welcome*
Hi there! Thank you again for being willing to participate in the interview aspect of my study. As I shared previously, my study seeks to understand the belonging experiences of first-year Muslim students on a college campus.

We will spend approximately one hour together today during which time I will be asking you about your decision to attend college, the university where you are enrolled, what it is like being a Muslim on campus, and your general experiences of belonging.

*Review Consent Form*

You completed a consent form indicating that I have your permission (or not) to audio record our conversation. Are you still ok with me recording (or not) our conversation today? ___Yes ___No
*If yes: Thank you! Please let me know if you change your mind and I will stop the recording.*
*If no: Thank you for letting me know. I will only take notes of our conversation.*

Before we begin the interview, do you have any questions? Okay, great. I'm going to go ahead and hit record.

**Demographic Information**

1. Gender:
2. Age_____
3. Birth place_____/ raised _____
4. When started at Drexel: Fall 2019____ Fall 2020___
5. Academic Major/Focus of Study: _____ _____
6. Do you speak any other language other than English? If so, which language/s?

*Rapport Building Questions*
1. Start by telling me a little about yourself and your decision to come to Drexel University.
    1. What motivated you to come to college?
    2. What drew you to Drexel and ultimately solidified your decision to enroll here versus elsewhere?
2. Given the current impact of COVID-19, have you physically been on campus?
    1. Where are you currently living?

3. How did your family respond to your decision to go to college? And to Drexel?

*Research Question: What is it like to be a first-year Muslim student on campus?*

1. There can be a lot of transitions associated with starting college. Describe what your experience has been like thus far. (Probe: What have been the highlights? What have been the challenges??
2. Did you feel welcomed when you first arrived/started?
3. What kinds of things made you feel welcomed/unwelcomed? (e.g., welcome week, group activities) (Probe: Is there a place on campus that makes you feel at home? A group or organization?)
4. How would you describe your level of comfort at this university? (Probe: 1 being not comfortable at all and 10 being extremely comfortable)

*Research Question: How do first-year Muslim undergraduate students at an urban university in the northeastern United States describe their sense of belonging on campus?*

Sometimes there are differences in the way people are viewed or treated within a community. The differences could be based on lots of things.

1. Do you think that being Muslim influences the way others at the University view you or interact with you?
      1. If yes, how so?
      2. If no, why not?
2. Are there other differences that matter within the Drexel community? Please tell me more.

*Research Question: How do first-year Muslim students describe their sense of belonging inside the classroom?*

We are currently learning in a remote or virtual environment. We are going to transition to talking about your experiences in the classroom.

1. How would you describe the connections you've made with other students in your classes?
      1. Do you feel a part of your classes?
      2. Do other students make you feel welcomed? How so?
      3. How comfortable are you in interacting with students who are of a different ethnicity than you?
      4. How many people like you are in your classes and how does that make you feel?

2. Do you think that your faculty members have helped to make you feel a part of the Drexel community?
      a. If yes, how?

121

       b.  If no, why? Are there things that faculty members have done or said that makes you feel like you are not part of the university community?

       c.  Do you feel comfortable approaching your professors? Why or why not?

3. Have you experienced and/or observed any situations that you'd describe as instances of discrimination or unfairness during any of your classes? If so, please explain without revealing any identities.

4. Is there anything else you would like to add about the faculty and how they make you feel?

*Research Question: How do first-year Muslim students describe their sense of belonging outside of the classroom?*

We are going to transition our conversation to your college experience outside of the classroom.

1. What is your current living situation? - How did you decide where to live?
2. Is there a particular group of people on campus or off-campus with whom you feel most comfortable? Why or why not?
3. Are there any physical locations on campus where you feel most comfortable? Why or why not?
4. What organizations are you involved in? How often do they meet? Do you always attend? Do you participate? How many hours per week do you dedicate to your involvement?
5. Name any off-campus organizations you are part of.
6. How often do you go home? How do you feel when you are home?

*Belonging on Campus*

1. How welcomed or unwelcomed do you feel now compared to when you first arrived here?
2. Was there ever a time you wanted to leave this university? If so, please tell me about it. (Probe: What made you change your mind?)
3. Tell me if there have been any of your friends who thought about leaving this university and why they left.
4. How would you describe your interactions with the different student services on campus? (Probes: Have you connected with certain staff from any offices?)
5. Who/what/how has impacted your sense of belonging at this university? (Probe: What makes you feel a part of this university?)

***Closing Questions***

Before we conclude this interview, is there something about your experience at this University that you think influences how you experience belonging that we haven't had the opportunity to discuss?

If you could give advice to another first-year Muslim student at the university, what would it be?

Trevino, Jessica
Fri 6/19/2020 10:18 AM
To: Zamulinsky, Katie; Holland, Deborah

Cc: Talbert, Tony

Is This HSR Booklet - TP (2).pdf
196 KB
Hello Katie,

Thanks for reaching out. Your study does not qualify as human subjects research because the results of your study would not be generalizable to a broader population due to only having 3-5 participants. Thus, you do not need to submit any documents to our office. Though your project does not fall within regulations, you are still required to conduct your study ethically, as discussed in the Belmont Report. Attached is our guidance booklet if you have questions about determinations. Let me know if you have any questions.

Best regards,
Jessica Trevino

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**From:** Zamulinsky, Katie <Katie_Zamulinsky1@baylor.edu>
**Sent:** Wednesday, June 17, 2020 12:37 PM
**To:** Holland, Deborah <Deborah_L_Holland@baylor.edu>; Trevino, Jessica <Jessica_L_Trevino@baylor.edu>
**Cc:** Talbert, Tony <Tony_Talbert@baylor.edu>
**Subject:** IRB Approval Question - Zamulinsky

Good afternoon, Dr. Holland and Ms. Trevino,
I hope this message finds you well.

I am a second (soon to be third) year student with the Ed.D. Learning and Organizational Change program. I'd like to get your thoughts on whether my research requires IRB approval. Here is a little information about my study:

Topic: A phenomenological case study to explore how first-year undergraduate Muslim students experience a sense of belonging on a college campus in the northeastern United States.

Sampling Details: Participants in this study are selected based on a purposeful criterion and snowball sampling.  The target number of participants is between 3-5 students.  All participants will be first-year, traditional-aged college students (18–22 years old), and identify as practicing or observant Muslims.  Due to the disruption caused by COVD-19, the sampling will be a blended sample in that "first-year" students will be defined as those that started their first year in the 2019-2020 academic year, as well as those that are starting in fall 2020.  Participants may be international or domestic students.

Data will be collected through the use of semi-structured interviews, as well as photo analysis.

Please let me know if you need additional information. Many thanks for your review.
Best,
Katie

APPENDIX D

Reflection Prompts and Photo Elicitation Email

Hi {Participant}

I hope your week is going well. Thank you for taking the time to speak with me the other week regarding your experiences as a Muslim student at Drexel.

Below you will find instructions for how to complete the second part of your participation in the study on Muslim student experiences of belonging.

1. Please send up to three photos or visual representations of your experience as a first-year Muslim student at Drexel. You should email your votes directly to me. Send your visuals to my attention no later than December 15, 2020.

2. Please respond to the reflection prompts available HERE. Responses should be completed no later than December 15, 2020.

3. As I've previously shared, each participant will be assigned a pseudonym to protect their identity. Is there a specific name that you'd like to use as your pseudonym? Please email your preference for a pseudonym along with your photos.

Upon completion of the reflection questions and photo-elicitation, I will coordinate the delivery of your Amazon gift card.

Many thanks for your participation. Please reach out with any questions.

Best,

Katie

APPENDIX E

Summary of Photos or Visuals Submitted by Each Participant

| Participant | Description of the Photo/Visual Submitted |
|---|---|
| Saad | Group of MSA students at an event |
| | Saad pictured with Imam at MSA event |
| | Potluck dinner dishes from MSA Thanksgiving event |
| Asim | Artist rendering of a man standing on cliff, looking at the ocean; Symbolizes all that is in front of Asim |
| | Photo of sunrise; Symbolizes hopefulness for his future at the University |
| | Photo of Asim's study station including his laptop, open books, and coffee |
| Kiran | Posting from class discussion board focused on Kiran's experiences with stereotypes and walking through life as a Arab Muslim woman |
| | Posting from class discussion board |
| | MSA Trivia Night |
| Salim | Selfie wearing hijab |
| | Photo of MSA women sharing meal together |
| | Intercultural Center |
| Naeem | Group of five students participating together in prayer |
| | Naeem sharing a meal with non-Muslim advisor |
| | Photo with friends from residence hall |

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